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# Improving the Effectiveness of Fundraising Messages: The Impact of Charity Goal Attainment, Message Framing, and Evidence on Persuasion

Enny Das, Peter Kerkhof & Joyce Kuiper

*This experimental study assessed the effectiveness of fundraising messages. Based on recent findings regarding the effects of message framing and evidence, effective fundraising messages should combine abstract, statistical information with a negative message frame and anecdotal evidence with a positive message frame. In addition, building on research into social dilemmas, it was hypothesized that information about charity goal attainment (e.g., the contributions of others) should increase donation intentions. The hypotheses were tested in a 2 (goal attainment: yes/no) × 2 (framing: positive/negative) × 2 (evidence: statistical/anecdotal) factorial design. Abstract information was more effective when combined with a negatively framed message, whereas anecdotal information was more effective when combined with a positive frame. In addition, donation intentions were higher for messages that addressed charity goal attainment issues.*

*Keywords:* Charity; Fundraising; Persuasion; Message Evidence; Message Framing; Social Dilemma

Charity organizations are faced with considerable fundraising problems. There is little doubt that most people feel the work of many charity organizations is important. Nevertheless, several organizations have concerns about the current state of the charity market. Charity fundraising has become much harder for several reasons. Cuts in government expenditure have increased the need for private donations. At the same time, the number of charity organizations has increased dramatically (Venable,

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Rose, Bush, & Gilbert, 2005). Household spending has not kept up with this increased need for private donations. Finally, charity organizations complain about the lack of news coverage of ongoing issues and “unpopular” problems in, for example, third-world countries (e.g., “Charities,” 2001).

This negative trend in the fundraising arena demonstrates the importance of uncovering factors that contribute to the effectiveness of fundraising messages. Not surprisingly, there have been several calls for more research into effective promotional strategies (e.g., Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996). Nevertheless, research into the effectiveness of fundraising messages has remained scarce and scattered across research domains. The present research proposes a persuasive framework that integrates several lines of research from communication, consumer, and health domains in order to improve the effectiveness of fundraising messages.

It is proposed that several message factors are critical in order to increase the perceived value of a charity goal and raise donation intentions (Bendapudi et al., 1996). First, the perceived value of a charity goal depends on message framing—that is, the decision to focus on the positive consequences of donating or the negative consequences of not donating—and on message evidence, which can be presented in an abstract, statistical way or in a more vivid and anecdotal manner. Second, in order to raise donation intentions effectively, fundraising messages should also communicate the likelihood of attaining a charity goal. It is proposed that influencing the likelihood of goal attainment is particularly important for fundraising messages, because donors cannot directly monitor the impact of their donation. In the next sections, we discuss recent findings regarding message evidence, framing, and goal attainment and then present an experimental study.

### **Increasing the Perceived Value of a Charity Goal: Message Evidence and Message Framing**

Given the rapidly growing number of charities, a particularly challenging task faced by charity organizations is to convey to the public that the charity cause is valid, urgent, and serious enough to compete with other problems salient to the public. One strategy for influencing the perceived value of a certain problem is to include evidence (see Reynolds & Reynolds, 2002, for an overview). Message evidence can be presented in numerous ways, such as by including statistical information, factual statements, narrative reports, or testimonials. Thus, a charity organization may demonstrate the urgency and importance of a charity goal by presenting the following statistical evidence: “10,000 people will die of starvation if we do not support them.” A different strategy to reach the same goal may be to include a vivid case history of just one possible victim: “This is Indra. She will die of starvation if we do not support her.”

It is undeniable that evidence enhances the effectiveness of persuasive messages (Morman, 2000; Reynolds & Reynolds, 2002), partly because evidence may make potential donors more knowledgeable (Morgan & Miller, 2002). However, the question of which types of evidence are most persuasive appears to be unsolved.

Some theorists have argued that vivid, narrative case histories are more compelling than abstract, statistical information because they evoke stronger mental imagery, reduce counterarguments, and have a stronger intuitive appeal (e.g., Green, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Reinard, 1988; Rook, 1987). Others have argued and found the opposite—that statistical evidence is more persuasive than narratives (Allen & Preis, 1997; Baesler & Burgoon, 1994). Still others have proposed that the relative efficacy of evidence types may be moderated by receiver characteristics such as judgmental orientation (e.g., Dennis & Babrow, 2005) and value-congruence (Slater & Rouner, 1996).

Within the context of fundraising, only a few studies have assessed the effectiveness of message evidence. One study found that adding images to make the evidence more vivid enhanced persuasion, thus indicating a positive effect of vividness (Burt & Strongman, 2004). A study in the health domain examined the effects of narrative versus statistical evidence on cognitive and emotional reactions to organ donation messages (Kopfman, Smith, Ah Yun, & Hodges, 1998). Cognitive reactions were affected more strongly by statistical evidence, whereas emotional reactions were affected more strongly by narrative evidence. These findings suggest that anecdotal evidence enhances heuristic processing (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989), whereby persuasion is the result of mental shortcuts. In contrast, statistical evidence may be more likely to promote systematic processing, whereby individuals carefully elaborate on the content of a charity message.

The second persuasive strategy important to the communication of the value of a charity fundraising goal is message framing. Broadly, a message can be framed in either negative or positive terms, otherwise known as loss versus gain frames (e.g., Detweiler, Bedell, Salovey, Pronin, & Rothman, 1999; Rimer & Kreuter, 2006; Rothman, Bartels, Wlaschin, & Salovey, 2006). An example of a negatively framed fundraising message is: “10,000 people will die of starvation if we do not support them.” A positive frame would describe the same facts as: “10,000 people can be saved from starvation with our support.” As with the literature on the use of vivid versus statistical evidence, the empirical evidence for the effectiveness of positive versus negative frames is mixed. Some studies suggest that positive frames are more persuasive than negative ones (Levin & Gaeth, 1988), while other studies suggest the opposite (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Davis, 1995; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). Various theorists have suggested that the effectiveness of positive and negative frames depends on processing motivation and capacity on the part of the receiver. Most of these studies report that negative framing is more effective under high processing motivation (Block & Keller, 1995; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; Rothman, Salovey, Antone, Keough, & Martin, 1993), especially when the opportunity to process is unconstrained (Shiv, Britton, & Payne, 2004).

The combination of low motivation with high opportunity to process is typical of the situation in which most charities find themselves. Given the numerous charities that try to capture the public’s attention, the base rate of motivation to process a fundraising message will be low. Although there are charitable goals that capture everyone’s attention, most charities promote goals that are not as salient as, for

example, a devastating tsunami hitting a major tourist resort. On the other hand, the opportunity to process information about charities and their causes is not highly constrained: the fact that most people do not think about charities too much is likely to be the result of choice rather than opportunity. Thus, in the case of charity fundraising, positive frames may generally exert a positive effect on persuasion.

However, the effectiveness of message framing is likely to be contingent upon another message factor—evidence. As argued above, abstract, statistical evidence enhances elaborate message processing, compared with anecdotal evidence (Kopelman et al., 1998). Accordingly, message framing and message evidence are likely to exert interactive effects on message processing and persuasion. Specifically, statistical evidence will enhance elaborate processing and increase the effectiveness of negatively framed fundraising messages. Conversely, anecdotal evidence will decrease message processing and enhance the effectiveness of positively framed fundraising messages. This leads us to our first hypothesis:

- H1: The effects of message framing on the perceived value of a charity goal will be moderated by the type of message evidence. When the evidence presented is statistical, negative framing of a charity's cause will be more persuasive than positive framing. When the evidence presented is narrative, positive framing of a charity's cause will be more persuasive than negative framing.

### **Motivating Helping Behavior: Communicating the Likelihood of Goal Attainment**

Thus far, it has been argued that message evidence and framing may increase the perceived value of a charity goal and, accordingly, positively affect persuasion. However, communicating the value of a charity goal may be a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in increasing donation intentions to charity. Specifically, to motivate the public to donate money, effective fundraising messages need to address the likelihood that the charity goal can be attained. Importantly, charity goals bear considerable resemblance to a social dilemma. In a social dilemma, an individual is typically faced with the choice between self-interest and the interest of the collective. Potential donors to charity organizations are faced with a similar problem.

Consider the classical parable of the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968). A number of herdsmen graze their herds on a common pasturage—the “commons.” Each individual herdsman will profit from adding more animals to his herd because this will improve his individual profit while the costs of grazing the animal (e.g., the damage done to the commons) will be shared by all. Adding more animals to his herd thus appears the most rational thing to do for all individual herdsmen involved. However, if all herdsmen decide to do just that, this will lead to the collapse of the commons: the commons will be overgrazed; the animals will not be able to eat; and the herdsmen will be ruined. The tragedy of the commons is an example of a social *trap*, in which behaviors that are gratifying for the individual in the short term imply long-term punishments for the collective. A social *fence* exists when the short-term aversive consequences of an act keep us from performing this act, even though it

would entail long-term benefits for the collective (Messick & Brewer, 1983). Thus, in the case of a social fence, the short-term rational choice is to do nothing rather than to do something.

Donating to charity has characteristics similar to those of a social fence. Keeping your money to yourself instead of giving it to charity seems like a rational thing to do. Moreover, if all the people who have seen a certain fundraising message, for example to help the victims of a sea-quake, decide to choose the cooperative option of donating money, then not much is lost if one person decides to keep his money in his pocket or spend it on a new CD. However, if all people make this rational, individual choice, nobody will donate money, and the victims will be lost. Of course, charity goals cannot literally be defined as a social fence because a collective goal in some faraway country hardly ever has a negative impact on the donator personally. Nevertheless, a common feature of charity goals and social fence dilemmas is that they both depend on the goodwill of many contributors, not just a few, to solve a problem. Thus, both problems are of a social nature and involve the behavior of others.

When individuals are faced with a social dilemma, two factors are vital in the decision to contribute to the solution of a social problem (Klandermans, 1992). The first factor concerns the value the social problem has for that individual. For instance, a person will not donate to an environmental organization like Greenpeace if he does not really care about solving environmental problems. Second, as we have seen, message evidence and framing can increase the perceived value of the problem addressed by a charity—however, even if individuals feel that a charity goal is extremely important, they are not likely to contribute unless they think that donating to the charity goal should help solve the problem. Thus, expectations about the likelihood that the charity goal can be attained constitute a second vital factor in individual decision-making about social problems. Indeed, several studies have shown that individual giving is driven by factors related to the instrumentality of the gift. For example, Sargeant, West, and Ford (2004) show that active givers give more when they perceive the charity organization to be effective. Frey and Meier (2004) show that contributions to charity are more likely when there is evidence that others contribute as well (so-called “conditional cooperation”; see also Fischbacher, Gächter, & Fehr, 2001).

To date, most empirical studies of charity advertising have focused on the perceived value of a social problem rather than on the likelihood of goal attainment. This is surprising, given the importance of influencing goal attainment for charity organizations. For instance, Smith and Berger (1996) propose that donors cannot directly monitor the impact of their donation and, thus, have to trust charity organizations to spend their money wisely. In the current study, we propose that there are ways to influence expectations about goal attainment in a persuasive message. Specifically, three expectations are vital to the decision to contribute: expectations about the number of participants, about one’s own contribution to the probability of success, and about the probability of success if many people participate (Klandermans, 1984). Communication about the likelihood of goal

attainment should be undertaken with care. If people believe that nobody else will help solve a problem, they will be unlikely to donate money themselves because, without the help of others, the problem can never be solved. Conversely, if a member of the public thinks that many other donors are already contributing to solve a problem, he is unlikely to donate because the chances are great that the problem will be solved without his individual contribution. Fundraising messages should, thus, underline the importance of each individual contribution for reaching a charity goal and explicitly state that others are already contributing.

- H2: Messages that contain information about the likelihood of goal attainment will induce higher donation intentions than messages that do not contain such information.

## Method

### *Overview*

This study manipulated message framing, evidence, and goal attainment communication in a fundraising message for the Dutch Leprosy Foundation. It was hypothesized that effective fundraising messages would influence the perceived value of the charity goal and expectations that the goal can be attained. Specifically, message framing (positive versus negative) and evidence (statistical versus anecdotal) were expected to have interactive effects on the perceived value of a charity goal. We further hypothesized that, in order to raise donation intentions, fundraising messages should include explicit information about the likelihood that a fundraising goal can be reached. Thus, explicit referral to goal attainment issues (present versus absent) was expected to exert a direct effect on donation intentions.

### *Design and Participants*

The hypotheses were tested in a 2 (goal attainment: yes/no)  $\times$  2 (evidence: anecdotal/statistical)  $\times$  2 (framing: positive/negative) between-subjects factorial design; 160 participants took part in the research, of which 71 were male and 89 were female. The mean age was 32. Two participants were removed from the analyses because of outlying values on the dependent measures ( $SD > 3$ ).

### *Procedure*

Passersby in the vicinity of the university campus of a large city were asked if they were willing to participate in a survey about the work of the Leprosy Foundation. Upon agreeing, participants were asked to read one of eight fundraising messages for the Leprosy Foundation that varied in terms of evidence, framing, and goal attainment. Other message factors, such as content and length, were held constant across messages.

The statistical evidence messages focused on information about the number of leprosy patients. For example:

Every minute a patient with leprosy is detected. This makes for a total of 600,000 patients a year, 10 to 20% of which are children. The leprosy bacteria can harm nervous tissue, often resulting in serious consequences. Because the skin becomes insensitive, wounds remain undetected and therefore become infections that cause disability. Damage to the nerves, muscle paralysis, damage to the eyes and blindness can be the result.

The anecdotal evidence messages told the story of one young leprosy patient:

Jit suffers from leprosy. This contagious disease will impair his nervous system. This may lead to numbness of his skin, the inability to feel wounds underneath his feet, and serious infections that may cause disability. In addition, Jit fears muscle paralysis that may damage his eyes.

Messages with a negative frame focused on the negative consequences of not donating money. For example: "When patients are not treated quickly, all these horrible consequences may become reality . . ." Messages with a positive frame focused on the positive consequences of donating money. For example: "With an intensive medicine treatment, leprosy can be cured; a timely treatment can prevent the horrible consequences of leprosy from occurring."

Communication about the attainment of the charity goal was varied, and explicitly addressed goal attainment expectations (cf. Klandermans, 1984). Expectations about the number of participants already contributing to the probability of success were addressed as follows: "Thanks to our 165,000 supporters, 150,000 patients are detected and treated each year." Expectations about each individual donor contributing to the probability of success were addressed by demonstrating that one single donation can make a difference:

Of course a lot of money is needed to continue all projects. It only takes 50 Euros [approximately 70 USD] to detect, treat and rehabilitate one patient. For the even smaller amount of 15 Euros [approximately 20 USD] a patient can be helped.

Half of the messages addressed goal attainment; the other half did not. After reading the message, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that contained our dependent measures. Finally, participants were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed.

### Measures

Participants responded to all items on five-point scales (e.g., 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very much").

*Manipulation checks.* After completing the questionnaire, three items assessed perceived message abstractness—that is, how abstract, vivid, and factual the message was perceived to be ( $\alpha = .68$ ). Two items assessed the extent to which participants felt the message was framed in a positive or negative way (e.g., "The text focuses on the positive consequences of donating to the Leprosy Foundation") ( $r = .59$ ). Three items assessed expectations about goal attainment (e.g., "My individual donation to the Leprosy Foundation can directly help reach the foundation's goals") ( $\alpha = .66$ ). Three items assessed the extent to which participants thought that other people would

contribute to the goal (e.g., “If I donate to the Leprosy Foundation, I will probably be the only one”) (reverse coded;  $\alpha = .71$ ).

*Persuasion.* Three constructs were included to assess the perceived value of a charity goal. First, participants were asked to answer five statements regarding the perceived relevance of the charity’s work (e.g., “Compared with the work of other charities that come to mind, the work of the Leprosy Foundation is much less necessary/much more necessary”). Second, attitude towards the charity organization was assessed by asking the participants to rate their attitude toward the Leprosy Foundation on six bipolar scales (e.g., bad–good, negative—positive) ( $\alpha = .71$ ). Third, attitude toward the message was assessed by three items measuring how persuasive, informative, and interesting the message was ( $\alpha = .71$ ).

*Intention to donate.* This was assessed by one item: “I am going to donate money to the Leprosy Foundation this year” (responses: 1 = “definitely not” to 5 = “definitely will”).

## Results

### *Manipulation Checks*

A unifactor ANOVA on the perceived abstractness of the message revealed an effect for message evidence ( $F[1,158] = 44.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$ ). Anecdotal evidence was perceived to be more vivid and less abstract ( $M = 3.26$ ) than abstract evidence ( $M = 2.63$ ). An effect of message framing was observed ( $F[1,158] = 68.88, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$ ): a positively framed message was perceived as more positive ( $M = 3.41$ ) than a negatively framed message ( $M = 2.18$ ). Communication about goal attainment significantly affected perceptions of goal attainment and the expectation that other people would contribute to the goal ( $F[1,158] = 26.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$  and  $F[1,158] = 188.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .54$ , respectively). Messages that addressed goal attainment positively affected perceptions that the charity goal could be reached ( $M = 3.09$ ) and that others would contribute too ( $M = 3.43$ ), compared to messages that did not ( $M = 2.46$  and  $M = 2.34$ , respectively). Thus, all experimental manipulations were successful.

### *Persuasion*

A 2 (goal attainment)  $\times$  2 (message framing)  $\times$  2 (message evidence) MANOVA on attitude towards the charity organization, attitude towards the message, and perceived relevance of the charity’s work yielded a multivariate main effect of goal attainment ( $F[3,150] = 4.02, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .09$ ) and a marginally significant effect of message evidence ( $F[3,150] = 2.61, p = .053, \eta_p^2 = .05$ ). Messages that addressed goal attainment evoked more positive attitudes toward the message ( $M = 2.66$ ) than messages that did not address goal attainment ( $M = 2.30$ ;  $F[1,152] = 11.72, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ ). Attitude toward the message was also affected by message evidence: participants reported more positive attitudes toward anecdotal messages ( $M = 2.61$ )

than toward abstract messages ( $M = 2.35$ ;  $F[1,152] = 6.15$ ,  $p = .014$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ).

The MANOVA also revealed the predicted multivariate message evidence  $\times$  message framing effect ( $F[4,149] = 5.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ ). The message evidence  $\times$  message framing interaction affected the perceived relevance of the charity's work ( $F[1,152] = 14.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ ). Simple effects analyses revealed that, in the anecdotal evidence condition, the charity's work was perceived as more relevant when the message was framed positively ( $M = 2.96$ ) rather than negatively ( $M = 2.68$ ;  $F[1,152] = 9.03$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ ). This effect was reversed in the abstract evidence condition, where the charity's work was perceived as more relevant when the message was framed negatively ( $M = 2.89$ ) rather than positively ( $M = 2.67$ ;  $F[1,152] = 5.69$ ,  $p = .018$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ) (see Table 1). Thus, the perceived relevance of the charity's work is greater for messages that contain abstract evidence negatively framed, or anecdotal evidence positively framed.

Next, to establish effects on the intention to donate and the mediating role of attitude towards the charity organization, attitude towards the message, and perceived relevance of the charity's work, we conducted a series of regression analyses. First, we regressed the intention to donate on goal attainment, message framing, message evidence, and their interactions. Only goal attainment affected intention to donate ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .048$ ). Following Baron and Kenny (1986), we then regressed intention to donate on the sole factor that constituted a potential mediator—the attitude toward the message. Attitude toward the message affected the intention to donate ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the last regression analysis, we regressed intention to donate on goal attainment (Step 1) and then added attitude toward the message (Step 2). In Step 2, the effect of goal attainment was reduced (from  $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .048$  to  $\beta = .07$ ,  $p = .381$ ). This reduction in the predictive power of goal attainment was significant according to the Sobel test ( $z = 2.69$ ,  $p = .007$ ; see Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

In sum, the single factor to affect positively the intention to donate was the presence of goal attainment information. This effect was mediated by attitude toward the message. Attitudes toward the charity message, in turn, were affected by explicit referral to goal attainment and by anecdotal (versus abstract) message evidence.

**Table 1** Interactive Effects of Message Evidence and Message Framing on the Perceived Relevance of the Charity's Work

Message framing	Message evidence	
	Abstract	Anecdotal
Negative		
<i>M</i>	2.89	2.68
<i>SD</i>	0.39	0.55
Positive		
<i>M</i>	2.67	2.96
<i>SD</i>	0.44	0.23

Finally, as predicted, the perceived relevance of the charity's work (compared with the work of other charities) increased as a result of either a positively framed and anecdotal message, or a negatively framed and abstract message.

### Discussion

This research tested the effects of message characteristics—framing, evidence, and goal attainment—on attitudes and intentions to donate to charity. It was argued that, in the current competitive charity market, charity organizations should not only persuade the public of the value of a charity goal, but also actively target the public's motivation to donate money. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that message framing and evidence would increase the perceived value of a charity goal, but would not be sufficient factors in increasing donation intentions. Drawing upon the social dilemma literature, we argued that effective fundraising messages should include information about the likelihood of charity goal attainment—that is, about donations being spent wisely.

As expected, message framing and evidence worked together in affecting the perceived value of the charity goal. Overall, anecdotal evidence was somewhat more effective than statistical evidence in persuading receivers that the charity addressed a worthy cause. In particular, anecdotal evidence had a more pronounced effect on attitudes toward the charity message. However, this effect of message evidence was qualified by message framing. Importantly, our findings showed that, compared with the work of other charities, the relevance of the present charity was perceived to be higher when the message combined abstract, statistical evidence with a negative frame, or anecdotal, vivid evidence with a positive frame. As hypothesized, explicit reference to the likelihood of goal attainment was most effective in motivating the public to help: information regarding goal attainment positively affected attitudes toward the message which, in turn, increased donation intentions.

These findings have several theoretical and practical implications. First, the findings underscore the value of the social dilemma literature to research and practice on fundraising for charity (Klandermans, 1992; Messick & Brewer, 1983). In a social dilemma, an individual is typically faced with the choice between self-interest and the interest of the collective. Donations to charity have characteristics that are similar to a specific social dilemma: a social fence. The short-term negative consequences of donating money may keep individuals from performing this act even though it would entail long-term benefits for the collective, in this case attaining a charity goal. Thus, unlike most types of consumer behavior that are mainly rooted in individual concerns, donations to charity are of a more social nature and involve the behavior of others. Accordingly, effective charity fundraising messages should explicitly address these social factors by referring to the behavior of others and the likelihood that a charity goal can be attained.

To date, research into fundraising messages has focused mainly on convincing the public that the charity strives for a worthy and important cause (e.g., Burt & Strongman, 2004; Kopfman et al., 1998). The present findings suggest that such

fundraising messages may influence perceptions of need but may not be enough to motivate donors actually to start helping. Consider, for instance, a charity organization that aims to help a country that is in a state of war—a war that has cost the lives of thousands of people, and in which the government controls all incoming resources. It is clear that a charity that helps the victims of war is serving a valuable and worthy cause. However, no matter how horrendous this war is and how many victims it has had, potential donors might worry that financial contributions to help these victims will fail simply because the corrupt government of this country might make it impossible to get the right resources to the people in need. Explicit referrals that a problem can, indeed, be solved seem paramount in complex fundraising situations like these.

A second theoretical contribution of the present findings concerns the interactive effects of framing and evidence on persuasion. Specifically, we found that anecdotal evidence is most persuasive when combined with a positive frame, and that statistical evidence is most persuasive when combined with a negative frame. These findings highlight the importance of a fit between message evidence and framing. This fit is likely to be contingent upon the processing mode that the receiver is made to follow and the frame that is subsequently used. Our findings suggest that the overall, presumably low, motivation to process information about charities and their causes should not be treated as a given: fundraising messages may affect motivation to elaborate upon message arguments by presenting statistical evidence. This is reminiscent of research into advertising: some advertising strategies, most notably comparative advertising (Pechmann & Esteban, 1994), succeed in making consumers switch to a more systematic mode of information processing. By contrast, anecdotal evidence has been shown to elicit reliance on peripheral cues (Kopffman et al., 1998). Accordingly, the mere valence of a positive frame may serve as a heuristic and increase persuasion (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990).

### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study was concerned with one charity organization that has elicited little media attention (the Leprosy Foundation). Of course, the media can play a crucial role in affecting the public's attitudes toward charity organizations. For example, bad press coverage about how donations are spent may ruin a charity's reputation and have a dramatic impact on donation intentions. An interesting avenue for future research may be to assess the role of attitudes toward a charity in the persuasion process more explicitly, for example by first asking respondents to read a newspaper clipping with either good or bad news about a charity organization.

Second, the present study did not include processing measures. Accordingly, the assumptions regarding the effects of framing and evidence on information processing remain untested. Also, our participants were college students, who may be more susceptible to the elaboration-enhancing effect of statistical information. Replication of the findings using another population and more direct assessment of message elaboration, such as cognitive responses to fundraising messages, will undoubtedly

add to the generalizability of the findings and to a better understanding of persuasion in the context of fundraising. Finally, although in this study message evidence, framing, and goal attainment were successfully manipulated, the reliability of some manipulation checks was rather low. Future studies may benefit from including additional checks of these message factors.

In any case, the present findings point to a fruitful alternative approach to studying message factors. Many previous studies have focused on testing the effectiveness of positive and negative frames, or statistical and anecdotal evidence separately, thus focusing on main effects of message characteristics on persuasion (e.g., Allen & Preis, 1997; Block & Keller, 1995). Our findings suggest that a fruitful alternative may be to study the joint effects of framing and evidence in a more systematic fashion. Perhaps such an approach will also help solve the controversies that have plagued research in this area for decades.

### *Practical Applications*

Fundraising is not an easy task, particularly in a crowded market where charities have to compete for public attention. Although there are several strategies for charities to use to gain public attention and increase donations, this study specifically focused on the features of a persuasive message that may help increase donations. To date, research into the effectiveness of fundraising messages has remained scarce. Our findings provide several important guidelines for designing effective fundraising messages.

First, a persuasive message should communicate the importance of a charity goal. There are several ways to achieve this aim; however, not all strategies will work equally well. Specifically, personalized stories about the ill fate of one individual victim (e.g., a tsunami victim) will work best when combined with a positive frame that focuses on ways to help better this fate and explicitly mentions how this will help. Thus, tragic, personalized stories may help increase the perceived value of a charity goal, provided that they are combined with a positively framed solution. The reverse is true for persuasive messages that use numbers and statistics to underline the importance of a charity goal. Such messages are most persuasive when combined with a negative frame that, for example, describes what will happen if the problem is not solved.

Second, and most important perhaps, the present findings show that framing and evidence are likely to influence the perceived value of a social problem, but may not succeed in increasing donation intentions. To raise funds, a persuasive message should include information regarding the benefits of donating money. In general, charity donors cannot directly monitor the impact of their donation and have to trust charity organizations to spend their money wisely. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that increasing expectations that individual donations are not spent in vain will be likely to affect donation intentions positively. In this sense, individuals are most likely to behave altruistically when there is evidence that there is benefit in doing so.

Importantly, raising expectations about the benefits of donating money should be done with care. If the members of the public believe that nobody else will help solve a problem, they are unlikely to donate money to a charity because, without the help of

others, the problem can never be solved. Conversely, if people think that many other donors are already contributing to solve a problem, they are unlikely to donate because the chances are great that the problem will be solved without their individual contribution. Fundraising messages should, thus, underline the importance of each individual contribution for reaching a charity goal and explicitly state that others are already contributing (Klandermans, 1992).

### Concluding Remarks

Contrary to popular belief, donations to charity are not merely motivated by altruism. Like many other human decisions, donations to good causes are subject to economic laws and ruled by concerns regarding the behavior of others. Accordingly, donations may vary as a function of the perceived effectiveness of a donation. Charities that incorporate these concerns are likely to stand a better chance in the fundraising competition.

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