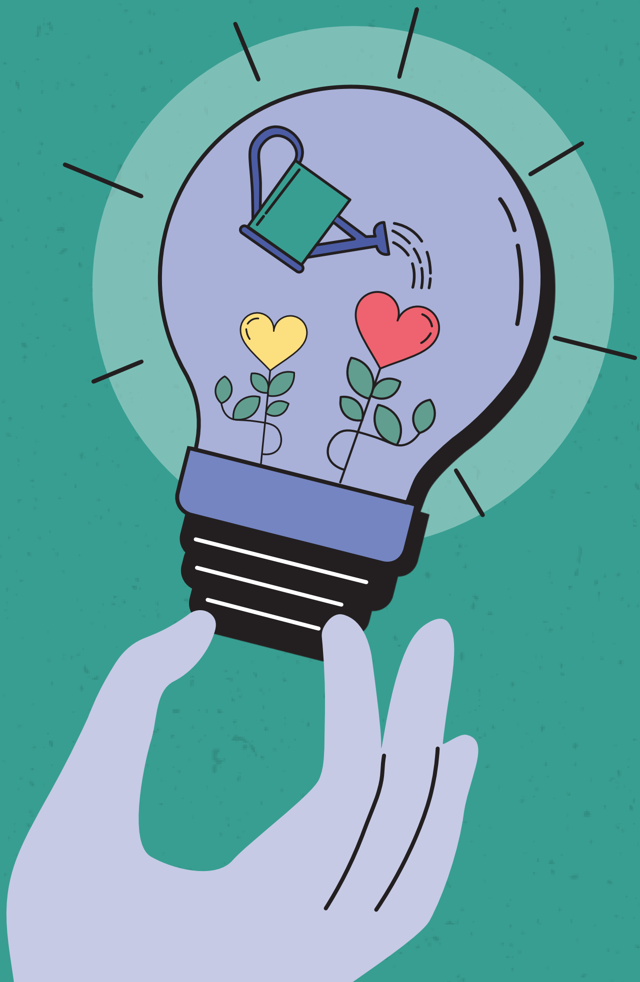
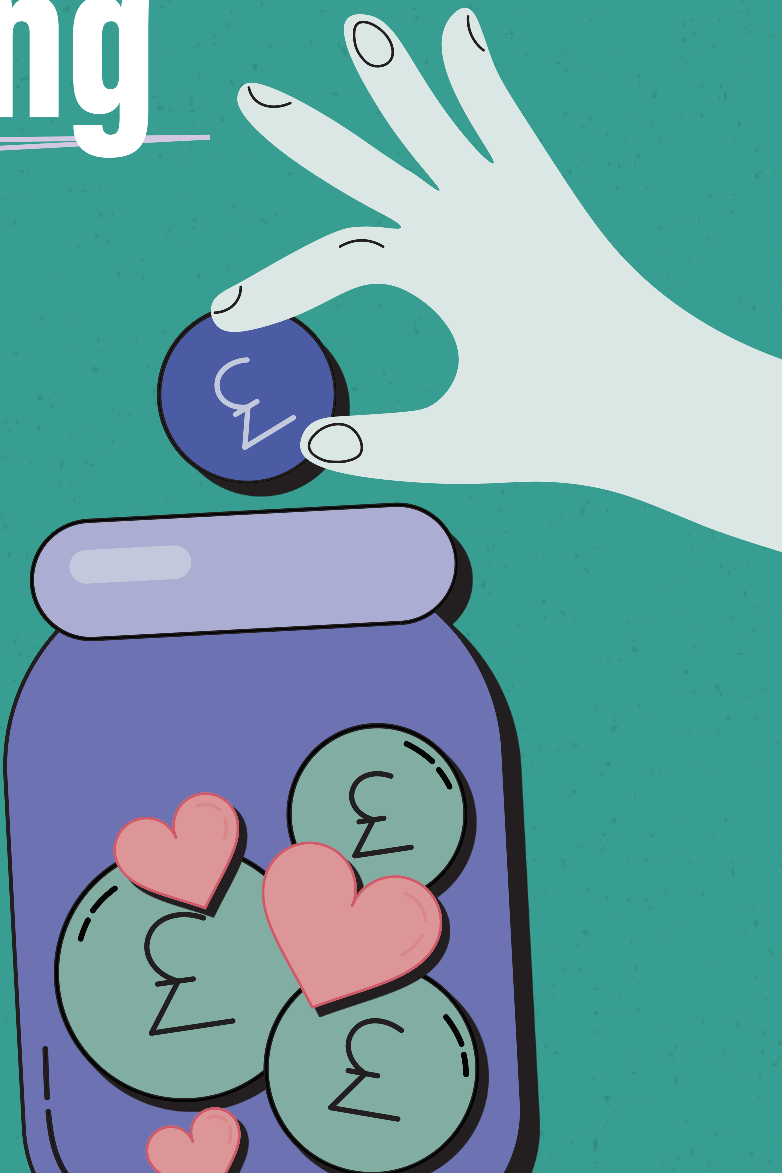
How to Use Behavioural Science to Improve Fundraising

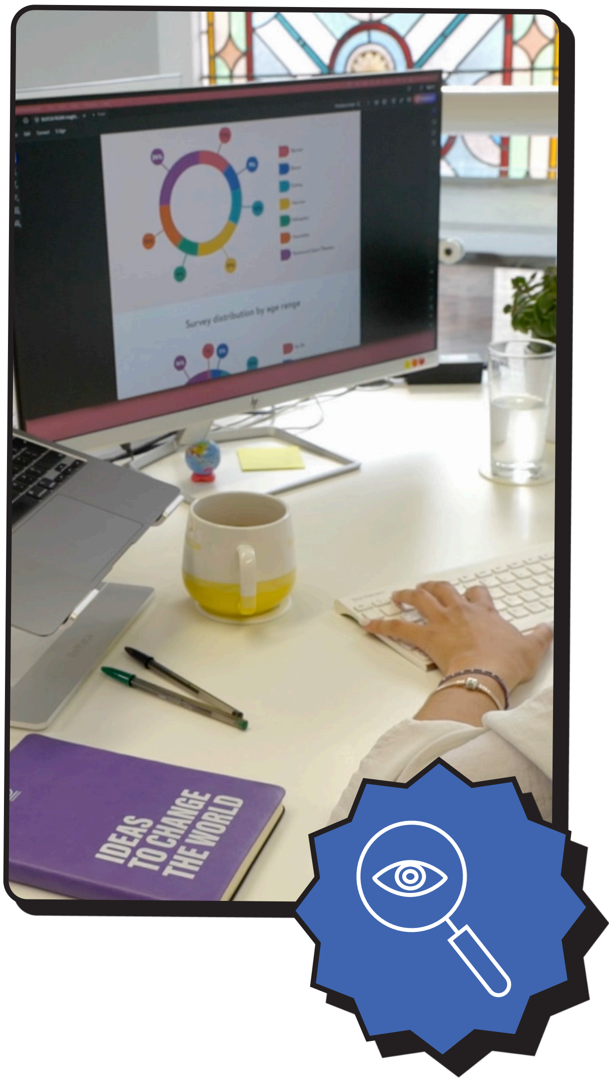




Before we get started

Have you heard the term 'behavioural science'? or mentions of how useful it could be for areas including fundraising and donor relationship management?

In this guide, we walk you through some basic principles of behavioural science, explaining how you could employ the different techniques and strategies towards fundraising in your organisation. To start, we will share our understanding of behavioural science, and then we'll guide you through a few key tactics that will allow you to leverage the research behind behavioural science to support your work in fundraising.



What is behavioural science?

Behavioural science is the systematic study of human behaviour. It is generally regarded as a multi-disciplinary field that incorporates elements of sociology, psychology, economics, linguistics, and anthropology, among others. And of course, once you obtain a good enough understanding of human behaviour, you are more equipped to change it.

Of course, this can raise issues about morality and ethics, and behavioural science can indeed be used for less than respectable purposes. This is treated with contempt, and is given the label of 'sludge.' However, the application of behavioural science is rooted in ensuring that the behaviour change is in the target population's best interests, or at the very least has a neutral effect, and is in alignment with 'nudging' people towards a choice, rather than removing their choices altogether. This way, behaviour change is softly encouraged rather than being forced – ensuring that the individual retains their power.

Key tactics

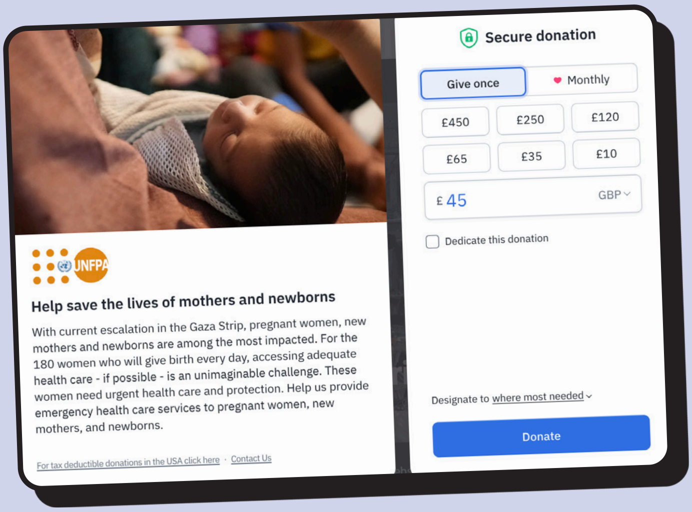
1 Learn from Uber, London Underground, and Amazon

As humans, we are programmed to have an ingrained dislike of uncertainty. Once that uncertainty is removed, things that we might have previously complained about no longer seem so bad. Think Uber's functionality that allows you to track your driver's ETA, and whether they're on the move or standing in traffic. Or how the London Underground digital signage tells you how long the wait is for the next train to Walthamstow. Or how Amazon tells you how many stops there are before yours on your delivery driver's route.

This is called **'Uncertainty Reduction'** and is a very effective way of encouraging people to engage while staving off negative emotions, a key aspect in fundraising. It can be incorporated into your charity or fund's website by showing your supporters how their donations are making a difference. No expense is too big or too small – it's the transparency that matters and builds trust. In 2024, according to a governmental poll, **6 out of 10 people** have high trust in charities[1], with transparency being the key factor that contributes to this trust.

Through reducing uncertainty of how your charity is making a difference and utilising donations, you will be further increasing trust and making the most out of engaging the "Trusting Helpers" segment of people, who already have high trust and engagement with charities and prioritise information transparency. Even though transparently publicising spend and contributions can be an overwhelming task, this would bring high value for effort as this segment makes up **62%** of the population.

Just look at how the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) transparently disclose where donations are going, emphasising how much goes to things like admin costs, while also making sure not to overwhelm the reader with information!



Screenshot from United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) showing a donation screen with a message explaining broadly how donations are used.

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Tangibility and Generosity

Perhaps another key aspect of attracting repeat, frequent, and or voluminous donations to your cause is the tangibility of your work and the visibility of the real effect the donations have. Researchers have long identified the positive effect of tangibility on donors' generosity (Cryder & Loewenstein, 2010).

Think of it this way. Imagine I gave you a piece of paper that says you are the owner of a flat in York. I don't give you any photos of your new flat, or the address, or anything else but ask you for £200 as a management fee. Would you feel like giving me £200?

Well, what if I gave you the same piece of paper and also a tour of the flat, and an hour's session with the building manager to familiarise yourself with the facilities, and THEN asked for £200 as a management fee?

Which situation would make you more amenable to being generous with your resources?

Now, apply this to your donors. They care deeply about a cause, and wish to help. They give their hard-earned money to the cause, hoping that it will make an impact, but unless the charity already publishes regular detailed reports on how they use donations, they have no tangible way of really knowing whether their contribution actually helped. Feels incomplete, doesn't it?

Transparency of Impact

It's not just important to be transparent with where your donations are going and how they are being used. It's also important to be upfront and honest with the tangible impact these donations have made. So, instead of simply saying that a portion of donations went to purchase meals for displaced children, it's important to quantify and make as tangible as possible the genuine effect of the financial aid on the lives of those it has helped.

This should also ideally be supported with evidence freely and proactively given and explained. This is your time to shine, so put all the great things you've done in a digestible and engaging summary – and you can always make several versions of this to cater to different types of donors – those who want all the detail but no frills, versus those who want a highlight reel, versus those who would want both. If still in doubt, take direction from Dementia UK, who create three versions of their annual impact report; a full comprehensive version totalling almost 100 pages, a shorter summary report only a third of the length, and an even shorter report summary in video format.

Remember, your donors and supporters see none of the work behind the scenes unless you show them, and they want to see!

a. Identifiable Victim Effect

You may have noticed that a majority of current charity appeals feature specific individuals whose plight is described in detail, as opposed to the use of statistics which describe a vague population in need of aid. This is because this does indeed tend to work better to encourage people to be generous and help (Lee, & Feeley, 2016).

Individual stories are more able to hook our emotional side and make us invested in the outcome of the individual's story. Yorkshire's Children's Trust puts this into action with a photo of a recipient of the donations, and their personal story written out at length, allowing people to connect and become invested in their future.

This is the **affect heuristic** at play – a shortcut humans have that helps us make faster decisions based on our emotional reactions. And when our emotions are triggered, we are more likely to take action than when we remain apathetic.

You may be thinking, well wouldn't hearing about millions of people losing their homes trigger more emotions than the life of one child in poverty? The answer is no, simply because we have a limit to how much tragedy our brains can process and react to – after a certain threshold we cannot muster up the same emotional response – otherwise we would be incapacitated by the flood of negative emotion.

So, it's all about demonstrating where donations go via a limited number of specific and individual stories as opposed to bombarding potential supporters with volley after volley of victims.

Screenshot from Yorkshire Children's Trust website showing a story and image of an identifiable, tangible beneficiary of the trust's donations.

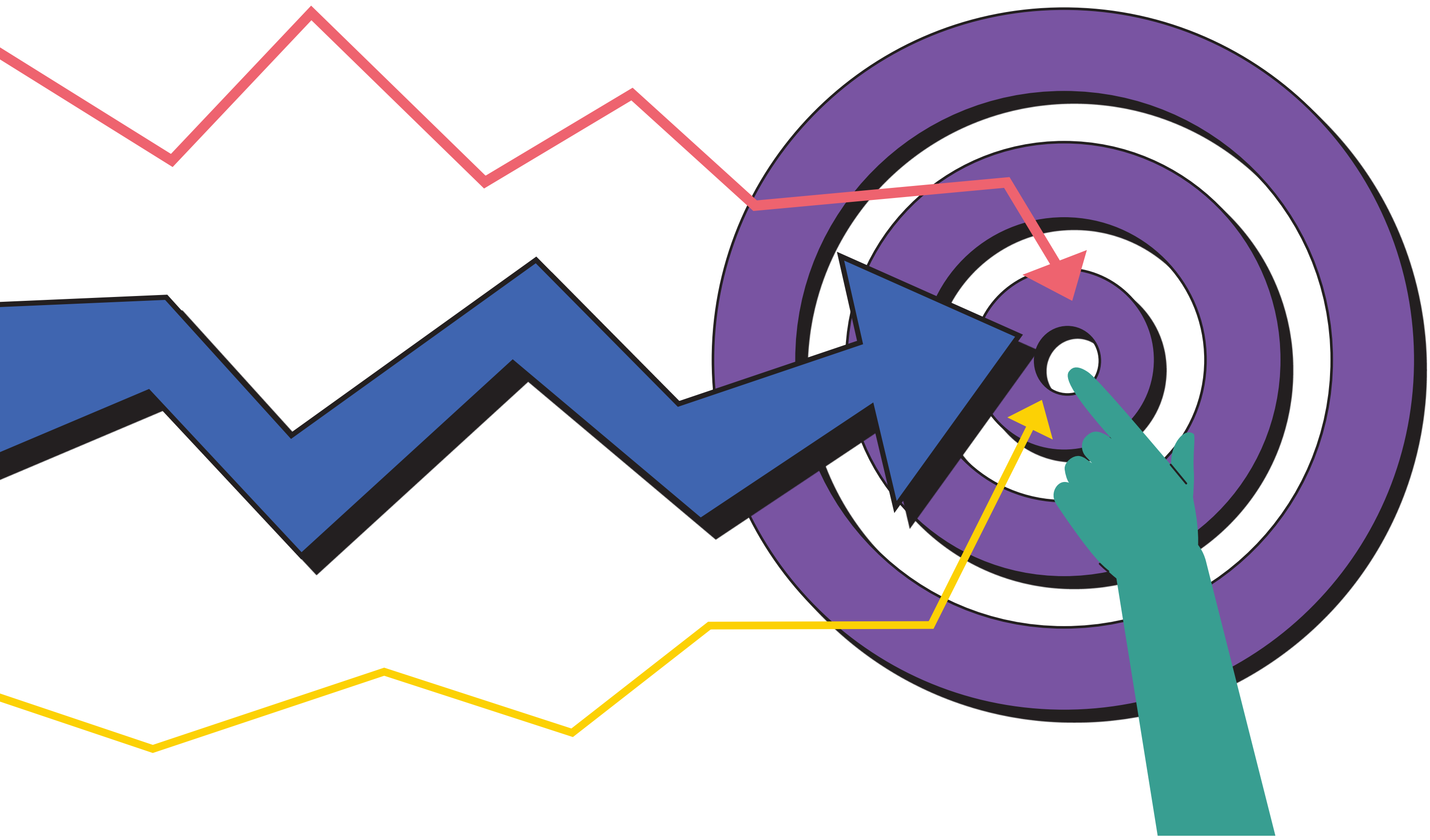
b. Visible Finish Line

It's not just seeing tangible proof of work or an identifiable victim that encourages people to be more generous with their money.

Something as simple as seeing the finish line on a monetary goal can make people keener to donate compared to being only half way or a third of the way to the finish line, or worst of all, not seeing a goal at all (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Seltman, 2008).

This is because whatever action is needed to take a project through that final stretch is perceived as more influential compared to the actions at the beginning or middle of a sequence. Just think about work projects – people who play a part closer to the end of a sequence of tasks often receive disproportionate blame if the result of the project is dissatisfactory compared to those at the start, even though steps at both ends are instrumental to the successful completion of the project. Likewise, the person who completes the final steps of a successful project receives a disproportionate level of praise and recognition compared to those at the beginning or middle stages. The actions closer to the end of a goal feel more tangible and impactful than those closer to the start, which makes people feel more excited to contribute.

Using this knowledge, you can craft messages to your supporters asking them to contribute to the last 5% necessary to reach your goal, which you can send out via mail, post, or any other medium you generally use. But don't just take my word for it. Send out the same type of message to a segment of your supporters asking them to contribute to the last 30% of your goal and see how the volume of donations changes!



3 Different Honours for Different Donors

As with most things in life, one person's trash is another person's treasure. So, you probably already know not to expect that one approach will work across all donors. Here are some key ways donors may differ and how you could leverage these differences.

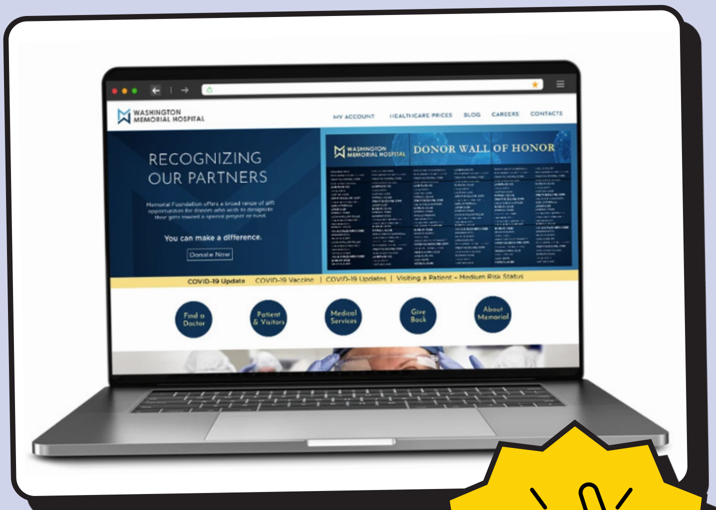
a. Praise or Anonymity

Not all donors will want to stay anonymous, and not all donors will want a plaque in their honour. It's pretty easy to tell who's who when a donation comes in, so pay attention and reward them accordingly.

Have a section on your website acknowledging all those who have made an open donation this month, week, or year – like the Washington Memorial Hospital did on their website. You can even create a shareable filter or image template for social media so that the donor can publicise their donation with their friends and family (thus raising awareness of your charity and encouraging others to follow suit). Shareable 'I have donated' filters also work because the more they're being used, the more trust is built simply due to the long-term exposure – it's literally called the **'Mere Exposure Effect'** (Zajonc, 1968).

But of course, don't forget the anonymous donors. At the end of the day, a simple thank you note can go a long way, and costs almost nothing to make.

Alternatively, and especially if the donation is especially weighty, you could create a breakdown of where the donation went and the impact that it made in a summary report to share with donors. Donors are more likely to donate again if they feel that their investment is making a tangible difference.



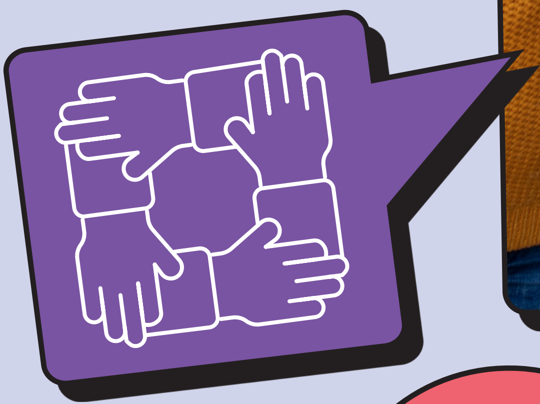
Screenshot of a Virtual Donor Wall from the omnially.com blog post showing an example of how donors could be recognised for their donations online

b. More and Less

When donors donate a significantly large amount, this is a sure-fire sign that you should probably pay attention and consider treating this huge donor a little differently than you would your every-day one.

People who donate large amounts of money tend to view their donations more as investments, and consequently treat their donations slightly differently to those who donate smaller amounts. Consequently, it would be natural to appeal to these different types of donors accordingly.

Messages emphasising the value of the individual effort of the donor contributing to a cause work better for larger donors, who have a stronger preference for seeing the need for their specific involvement. Whereas appeals of collective effort like "together we can accomplish..." work best with donors who give smaller amounts, ensuring that appreciation for their contribution is communicated, no matter how small.



4 Apply the Principles of EAST

The EAST acronym stands for Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely, and is a framework of four pillars that make it as simple as possible to apply the main principles of behavioural science to your applications. It can essentially make it easier for your target population to engage in a specific behaviour by making it easy to do, attractive to engage in, socially engaging, and timed specific to the moment at which they make a decision.

You can apply this framework in a plethora of ways, including in physical manifestations such as donations boxes, as well as digitally, like your website or digital donations page. Make your website easy to navigate, and make the donation process especially as simple and as smooth for the end user as possible. There's nothing more frustrating than trying to make a donation on a website that refuses to cooperate.

You can also place your donation appeal close to where people would already be handling their money, therefore making it more time appropriate and easier for them to donate – there's a reason why charity appeals in shops and supermarkets are usually located at the tills!

You can make your donation box fun – attractive to engage in. There are loads of creative ways in which people have started doing this, for example cascade vault boxes, or interactive ones like what the Natural Museum of Scotland has done pictured below.

A screenshot of a digital donation box from the Natural History Museum sourced from Google Images

A screenshot of a digital donation box from the National Museum of Scotland sourced from Google Images

5 Anchoring

Perhaps one of the simplest and most effective ways in which you could infuse your fundraising activities with behavioural science is by making small but significant changes to your website.

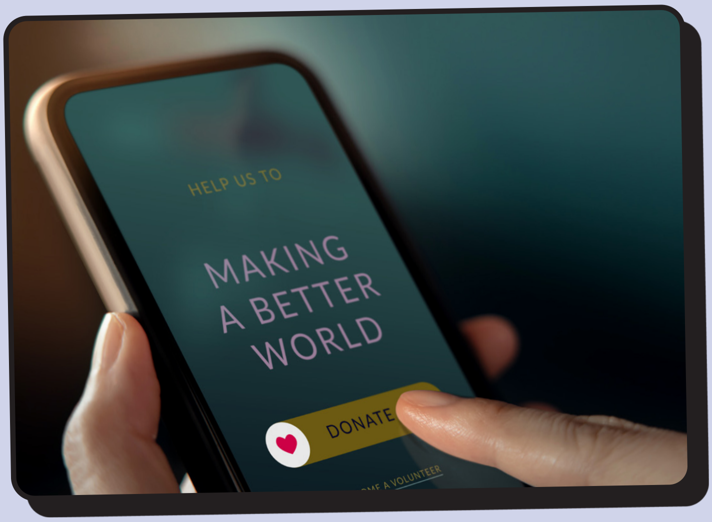
Specifically, by taking advantage of the **anchoring phenomenon**, and changing up the way you present your donation page to users and site visitors. Anchoring is a phenomenon whereby people use the first piece of information they are given as an 'anchor', a point of reference for their decision-making.

So, for example, by raising the suggested donation option to £45 from £15, you can increase the actual amount the individual is comfortable in donating. By ensuring that you are presenting the right information in the right order, you are more equipped to guide site visitors' first impressions and subsequent decision making towards increasing the value of an average donation.

Alternatively, you can highlight the higher donation option first, so that the subsequent lower donation amounts seem more affordable, thereby nudging people to give a higher donation than they would have otherwise given. For example, by offering options to donate £200, £100, or £50 in that order, the individual may be more willing to donate a number closer to £50, even if their initially intended donation amount was lower.

Another way of using anchoring is by combining it with personalisation, but this only works if you have accurate information regarding an individual's past donations to your charity or cause. So, if you know person A donated £20 last year, you can send them a personalised e-mail or text message referencing this number and asking if they would be willing to give a slightly higher number this year, for example £35. The initial number then becomes the anchor point, and can make it more comfortable for people to decide to match or increase their donation from last year.

When you use anchoring, remember to make sure that the anchor points you set are higher but are still realistic, otherwise their use can backfire and lead to a decrease in donations instead. You can learn more about how anchoring works by reading our guide on Anchoring **here**.



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Employ Social Proof

This strategy comes back to one of the biggest barriers to donating – trust. A simple and straightforward way of encouraging trust is by employing **social proof**. People are inherently influenced by others in their decision making, and strive to act within the social norms of their group.

By being exposed to signposting like the “most popular choice” or “typical donation” amount on your website, individuals are more likely to be influenced towards giving a similar amount. So, for example, you can encourage donors to give closer to £50 donations on average by claiming that this is what most people donate. Of course, be honest with this tactic and do not lie to your donors – if £30 is what most people give, don’t set the most popular donation amount to £100.

This way, the tactic employs both social proof and anchoring, by informing the potential donor of others’ choices, and anchoring them to the popular amount. Together, these small changes to the positioning of donation options can increase the value of your average donation value.

Another example of social proof in action is how transparent donation boxes tend to collect more donations compared to containers that are opaque – simply because those who consider donating are more willing to do so after seeing how many others have already donated too (Jacob, Guéguen, and Boulbry, 2018). Just look at how Tesco integrated EAST and social proof by creating an attractive and interactive donation box that lets others see how many people have already donated.

A screenshots sourced from Google Images showing a Tesco’s transparent donation box that employs voting as a method of increasing the social aspect of donations

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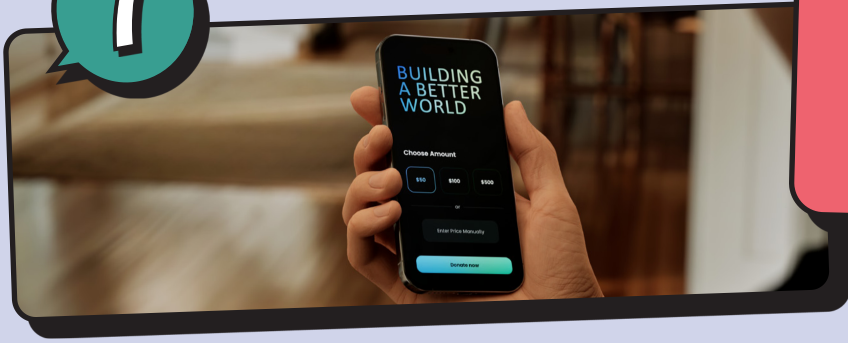


Message Framing

The way a message is communicated can make a world of a difference, even when the actual content remains the same. Here are just some ways you can use message framing to boost donations and engagement with your charity.

a. "Because"

When making any type of request, it's good practice to include a "because", by which of course I mean providing a short rationale for the request.

As first identified by Ellen Langer and colleagues in 1978[2], not only does explaining why the request is being made help people understand the need and get onboard with it, the word 'because' in of itself acts as a powerful tool that appeals to our inherent drive to understand the reasons behind things and increases chances of compliance.

Underneath the hood of this **'because heuristic'** is an intricate combination of psychological processes that combine to produce the effect - a sense of triggered **reciprocity**, a reduction in cognitive load, and an increase in empathy creation.

Providing a rationale is your chance to humanise your charity and cause to the donor, and appeal to their empathetic side, while meeting the donor's need to understand how their donation will be useful and how it will be making a difference.

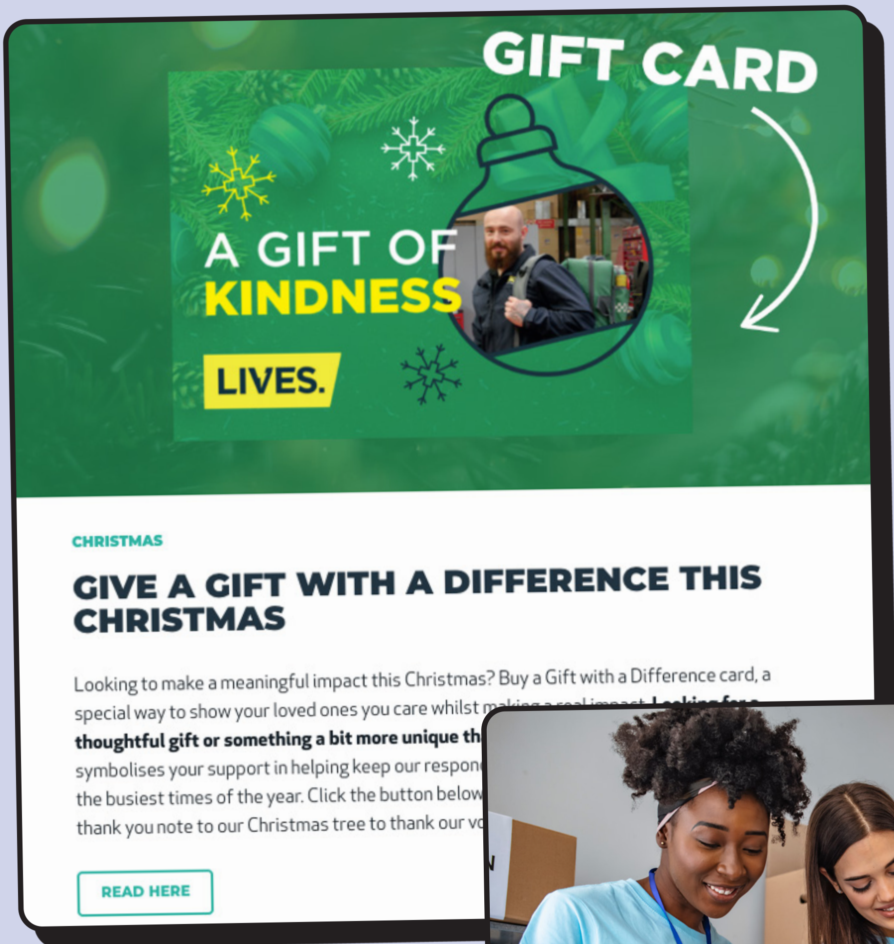
By including the word 'because', the request signals the rationale providing process, and moves the cognitive load off the donor to provide an explanation for their donation – one is already given! This works even if the rationale itself is not very strong, but it does tend to work even better when the explanation is reasonable. For example, "Please donate £5 to our rescue because we recently saved 15 puppies from a breeder mill" would be more effective compared to "Please donate £5 to our rescue because we need your support", which is more effective than "Please donate £5 to our rescue".

b. Donations or Gifts

Following in the same vein, even something as simple as framing charitable giving in appeals as 'gifts' rather than 'donations' can increase both giving intentions and the actual volume given (Wang, Wang, & Jiang, 2023).

However, it is important to match the frame to the target audience, as different approaches work for different groups of people. For example, the current donation or gift frame will work best for donors that have some connection to the recipients that the charity is raising money for, for example raising funds for a local shelter as opposed to a gorilla conservation thousands of miles away.

For example, LIVES, a charity local to Lincolnshire that employs medically trained professionals and focuses on providing emergency care to those in need has recently created a Christmas campaign raising funds for their volunteers by framing donations as a 'gift.' This is appropriately targeted at those living in Lincolnshire, where this type of appeal would work best.



A screenshot from the LIVES website showing a method of donating to the charity being framed as a 'gift'

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Don't be afraid to fail!

At the end of the day, even though there is so much research out there still being conducted on the best ways to fundraise and encourage donations, not all behavioural science informed tactics will work the same way for every charity.

Your cause, your structure, messaging, reputation, and target audiences are all different, so it's only natural for some things to work better than others, and for some things not to work at all. So, what do you do?

Well, the best thing we can genuinely recommend is to play around with the different tactics you discover, ensure you accurately record and report your methods and findings, and see what works best for you! Not everything will resonate with your donors and supporters, but testing, learning and adapting is the best strategy for your charity.

And of course, if you have any questions on other ways behavioural science can be used to help you fundraise, or if you simply want the results of how different tactics work for you without the hassle of carrying out the research yourself, contact us at **hello@social-change.co.uk** and we'll do our best to find a solution tailored to your organisation's needs.

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London.

The Gridiron Building,
1 Pancras Square,
London,
N1C 4AG

Phone: 020 7186 1980

Lincoln.

First Floor,
29-31 Mint Street, Lincoln,
LN1 1UB

Phone: 01522 77 50 60

www.social-change.co.uk