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Parents Matter: New Study Shows Influence of Family on Giving Decisions

By Raymund Flandez

New York

Household income and education levels are usually the key elements fund raisers use to figure out who is most likely to give, but it turns out something else is more important: whether a potential donor's parents were involved in charitable causes.

That is one of the findings of new study of donor attitudes and giving behavior released this week by Russ Reid, a Pasadena, Calif., company that provides direct-marketing services to nonprofits. The study was released here at the Direct Marketing Association New York Nonprofit Conference.

Parental involvement in nonprofits increases the odds of a child becoming a donor by more than 80 percent; with parents who don't, there's only a 25-percent chance the child will grow up to be a donor, the study found.

Nonprofits can build their donor pools of tomorrow by encouraging adults to volunteer their time at an organization, to talk to their kids about nonprofits they support, or to give money to their church, says Lisa McIntyre, senior vice president for strategy development at Russ Reid.

"It's a surprising finding, but it's not necessarily actionable," says Ms. McIntyre, explaining that organizations may have a hard time identifying which donors and volunteers are also parents.

Key Findings

The "Heart of the Donor" study surveyed more than 2,000 adults online and by phone, in English and in Spanish.

Here are some other highlights:

Age matters. The dollar breakdown of estimated yearly giving among age groups: People ages 18 to 24 donated \$350, those 25 to 39 gave \$544, people ages 55 to 69 gave \$805, and those 70 and older donated \$1,200. "The older you get, the more generous you are," says Ms. McIntyre. Fund-raising expenditures should be

“invested accordingly” toward segments that are more likely to give, with a higher gift value.

Donors give in many ways. On average, individuals gave in three ways—55 percent gave online as well as via mail; 20 percent who gave online also gave through a telemarketing call. Sending a check through mail still was the most popular method at 61 percent.

Don't bet on social media yet. While 57 percent of all donors use social media, only 6 percent actually gave money that way. “There’s a big difference between following and giving,” Ms. McIntyre says. “Make sure current investments are energies that yield the highest returns.”

Make your Web site work. The majority of people seeking information on a nonprofit went to the charity’s Web site or searched the Internet for news about the organization. Half talked to a friend who supports the charity, while 35 percent checked a watchdog group or talked to a staff member. Only about a quarter read the annual report. “Universally, your Web site is the single most important communication vehicle you have,” Ms. McIntyre says. “Make sure it supports your fund-raising objectives.”

Getting the second gift. The top three factors that donors said persuaded them to give again were that “the group explained its specific mission to me”; “they made me feel that my gift really made a difference;” and “they gave me information on exactly what my gift helped accomplish.”

What Haiti did. Four out of 10 Americans reported giving to Haiti. Nearly 30 percent of Haiti donors said they did not support any nonprofits in the past year, while 16 percent said they would not be giving again. Those “nondonors” said they were giving to a country, not to a nonprofit organization, Ms. McIntyre says.

An additional fact: Blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and immigrants were the largest groups that gave to Haiti; many of them were first-time donors. Did texting siphon off bigger gifts? Only 12 percent said they would have given more, while 68 percent would have given the same amount through other means. “Haiti appears to have brought in significantly more donors new to donating who would not have otherwise given,” Ms. McIntyre said.

The company plans to release more findings from the study in the next few months.