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PERSUASION AND CHARITABLE DONATIONS: VARIATIONS IN EMAIL SOLICITATION TECHNIQUES FOR THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

Persuasion is an important topic in psychology, and it is often applied in other areas including marketing, economics, and business models. Psychological research can shed light on the world of fundraising, which is embracing the benefits of psychology as a tool for improving campaign strategies. When applied to fundraising, the study of persuasion also connects with research on helping behavior.

This study measures the effect of altering a routine solicitation email from an academic library on its recipients' responses. My hypothesis is that altering the solicitation emails, by removing bold formatting, inserting an anchoring phrase and image, and especially doing both at once, will increase the rate of click-throughs (recipients following up on the suggestions in the email) and also lower the rate at which recipients unsubscribe from the listserv (demonstrating their disinterest in giving in the future). I found that the alterations did not improve click-throughs over the control condition, nor did it cause significantly fewer recipients to unsubscribe from the listserv. Directions for future research are discussed.

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Introduction

The art and science of persuasion has fascinated students of psychology for as long as the field has existed (Cialdini, 1985). Persuasion is an important aspect of human behavior, much of which takes place via communication, be it through interpersonal interaction or mass media. Persuasion, along with decision making in general, can be affected by the irrational biases known as heuristics. Heuristics, the cognitive shortcuts we unknowingly use to make judgments, are key to understanding communication and persuasion. They address the inherent biases that people hold, including representativeness, availability, and anchoring (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Cialdini, 1976). These heuristics figure prominently into persuasion, in that they can lead people to make judgments not based on reason and rationality (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Because of that tendency, many fields of practice stand to gain by expanding their knowledge of this phenomenon. Of particular interest in this study are those who engage in fundraising.

There is more to fundraising than pure marketing or advertisement techniques. When people decide whether or not to donate to a cause or institution, their willingness to help is involved. Helping behavior was initially explored experimentally in the context of emergency situations (Latane & Darley, 1970), and later in terms of more everyday situations such as volunteerism (Omato & Snyder, 1995). Studying helping sheds light on what it takes to persuade another person to do something for others without the expectation of a returned favor. Understanding the motivations behind this kind of prosocial behavior in humans is invaluable for nonprofit organizations or any entity involved in charitable giving.

Fundraising is an illustrative example of both persuasion and helping psychology in action. Fundraising requires an organization to appeal to an audience to give over their hard-earned money—often for nothing tangible in return. By understanding the strategies (e.g.,

linguistic and visual) that are the most successful at generating interest in a cause, fundraisers can learn not only how to appeal to donors but also what features of an appeal may discourage them or foster apathy.

There are plenty of conventional wisdom and "common sense" tactics for successful fundraising, but not as many scientifically supported methods. There have certainly been experimental studies in fundraising strategy (Desmet, 1999; Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976). However, many of these involve either face-to-face interaction or larger-scale appeals to significant donors, such as putting the donors on the board of the organization (Lorenzen, 2010). In contrast, it appears that relatively little systematic research addresses the increasingly common use of online solicitations.

Libraries are one socially important potential beneficiary of fundraising. In particular, libraries are an important part of any university. Libraries are a vital part of Student Centered Learning, an educational movement that seeks to improve the academic experience of disadvantaged students in particular (Arko-Cobbah, 2004). In addition, expenditures by university libraries are directly correlated with student retention (Mezick, 2007). More research on fundraising for an organization such as a university library will not only expand the field of fundraising and provide a new perspective on what strategies work on specific demographics, but will help bolster the financial prospects of an indispensible part of higher education.

The Pennsylvania State University Libraries have never run systematic analyses of its extensive fundraising records. Despite meticulous records kept of each year's donations, PSU's Libraries are busy year-round and don't take the time to consider the data and strategize as to how best to secure additional funding for this important institution. Some previous research suggests that donors to universities will likely have similar levels of education and income

(Blumenfield & Sartain, 1974). However, studies of this type do not provide guidance for the Libraries to construct a strong plan for email solicitations during future campaigns.

The present study was conducted to contribute to filling the gap in the PSU Libraries' research concerning their fundraising strategies, and, more generally, to contribute to research about persuasion techniques in email campaigns. The Libraries' campaigns often involve email solicitations, so it was important to decide which fundraising strategies to test in this unique format of communication.

There appears to be little published work regarding successful email solicitation in particular, so in order to select which alterations should be made to the Libraries' emails, I reviewed research on other solicitation formats, such as direct mail solicitation. Literature on direct mail response optimization (Vriens, van der Scheer, Hoekstra, & Bult, 1998) demonstrates attempts to determine what an ideal donor appeal letter would look like. Certain variables used in Vriens et al.'s article are not useful to this study because of their specific relevance to direct mail (e.g., envelope decoration, paper quality, etc.), but that still left a useful part of their conclusions. Vriens et al. determined that one of the aspects of an optimal mailing is that it does not use amplifiers, such as bold print, concluding that "The optimal mailing design should have a payment device that is not attached, no brochure, no illustrations, no amplifiers …." (Vriens et al., 1998). Vriens et al.'s idea of amplifiers and illustrations as distractions provided an interesting counterpoint to Desmet (2003), who suggests that an image might be useful in a fundraising campaign. Both of these features appear often in charity appeals (Vriens et al., 1998), so determining the true benefits and detriments of them could be illuminating.

The second variation used in my study is based on an oft-studied subject in psychology, the anchoring bias. The anchoring bias, which is one of the most cited heuristics, makes people

more likely to pick a number close to one that has been presented to them, within reason. For example, when guessing how many beans are in a jar, a person who is asked if they think it is over or under one hundred will tend to make a guess closer to one hundred than someone who was not prompted in this way. Anchoring has been applied to fundraising as well. Research indicates that in many cases giving donors an idea of what size of gift is needed can be a good strategy (Desmet, 2003). However, no one has tested whether this approach to anchoring maintains effectiveness over time with repeated solicitations, and it seems plausible that the repeated use of the same kind of anchor may lose effectiveness. Fortunately, there are ways to take advantage of this heuristic, priming certain levels of donation, without overtly suggesting an amount. In Kraut and Resnick's (2008) article on fundraising online, the image of a thermometer is discussed as a classic tool for visualizing the goals and needs of an organization. Showing how much has already been accomplished toward a goal, especially when the goal appears to be within reach (as in this study's case), not only involves anchoring but also prompts yet another heuristic: that of normative pressure. When people perceive others as having given to a cause, they themselves are more likely to give into the pressure and donate (Callero, Howard, & Piliavin, 1897; Cialdini, 2007). Since Kraut and Resnick's (2008) article was about raising money online, it seemed to be especially relevant for designing an email solicitation.

Because the Libraries have never run systematic analyses of their fundraising campaigns before, it would be impractical to try to standardize and examine past records. Instead, this study will focus on variations in formatting, style, and image use in what is referred to as a soft-ask campaign email. This approach will assess any improvement in response rates (measured in click-throughs) and donations between the control email and the variations, and will address any beneficial or detrimental combinations of the control and varied conditions. The outcome of this

project should help the University Libraries to use its resources more efficiently, and the development office may improve their yearly success.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study were selected from the Penn State Office of Annual Giving's list of alumni and previous donors. The list included all past libraries donors (those who have made a gift to libraries and provided an email address), household alumni couples that graduated from different colleges within the University and have not made a gift in the past 6 years, and a group of the Libraries' special constituents (this group was defined by the Libraries staff as people who they feel could support the libraries).

The list used contained 34,758 people. Of those, 14.8% opened the email, leaving an effective sample of 5,136 out of the original 34,758[1] who were actually exposed to one of the solicitation emails.

Each email contained hyperlinks to the Libraries' website as well as a direct donation page. The data obtained for this study shows which ones of the recipients clicked through each link and, if they did, whether they made a donation on the Libraries' website. The study dataset also shows whether the recipient opted to unsubscribe from the listserv.

Design

The purpose of this project was to measure and analyze responses to various forms of emails soliciting donations to the Penn State University Libraries. Email recipients are past donors to the library. The "control" email, which is the most similar to emails that have been sent out by

[1] Analyses were also run taking into consideration emails that the Libraries did not code as having been opened, and the results were insignificant. Click throughs returned χ^2 (3) = 2.163, p = 0.539, and unsubscriptions returned χ^2 (3) = 2.160, p = 0.540.

the Libraries in the past, was altered very slightly into three additional versions. The donors were quasi-randomly divided into four groups, each receiving a different version of the email. The emails were sent and the data collected as per the Office of Annual Giving's usual procedures.

This study uses a full factorial design, with subjects assigned to one of four conditions. There were two independent variables. The first independent variable was whether or not amplifiers (i.e., bold formatting) were present, and the second independent variable was the presence or absence of an anchor in the form of an image of a thermometer depicting how far away the libraries were from their fundraising goal. In total, then, there were four versions of the email, one control (the version most like past solicitations from the Libraries), one that removed amplifiers from the control, one that added a thermometer to the control, and one that both removed amplifiers and added a thermometer. These emails are shown below.

Condition 1: "Control" (Amplifiers, No Anchor)

Dear Mr. _____,
Thank you for supporting the University Libraries. **We're proud to be recognized as one of the top ten research libraries in North America, public or private.**
The **Penn State Libraries** subscribes to more than 110,000 online journals and logs more than 7 million visits to 23 campuses annually. Last year, we added over 14,000 books to our 5.8 million volumes. And thanks to investments in technology, and the generosity of alumni like you, we are able to serve 96,000 students and 41,000 faculty and staff **on every campus, in every field of study, from anywhere in the world.** We also lend to the public across the Commonwealth and serve as a model to peer institutions across the country.
This January, your gifts facilitated the opening of the Tombros and McWhirter Knowledge Commons in Pattee Library. The Knowledge Commons is a perfect example of how philanthropy is transforming our Libraries to spaces that better prepare our students for the work spaces and technology they will encounter when they enter their professions.
I hope you continue to invest in the Libraries, one of the shining hallmarks of this great university.
Barbara I. Dewey
Dean of University Libraries and Scholarly Communications

Condition 2: No Amplifiers, No Anchor

Dear Mr. _____,
Thank you for supporting the University Libraries. We're proud to be recognized as one of the top ten research libraries in North America, public or private.
The Penn State Libraries subscribes to more than 110,000 online journals and logs more than 7 million visits to 23 campuses annually. Last year, we added over 14,000 books to our 5.8 million volumes. And thanks to investments in technology, and the generosity of alumni like you, we are able to serve 96,000 students and 41,000 faculty and staff on every campus, in every field of study, from anywhere in the world. We also lend to the public across the Commonwealth and serve as a model to peer institutions across the country.
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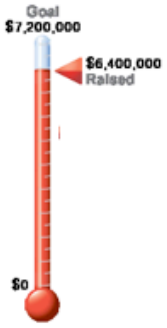
Condition 3: Amplifiers, Anchor

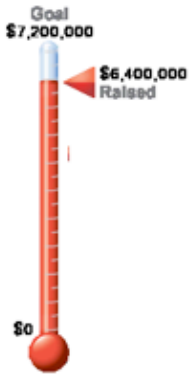
Dear Mr. _____,
Thank you for supporting the University Libraries. **We're proud to be recognized as one of the top ten research libraries in North America, public or private.**
The **Penn State Libraries** subscribes to more than 110,000 online journals and logs more than 7 million visits to 23 campuses annually. Last year, we added over 14,000 books to our 5.8 million volumes. And thanks to investments in technology, and the generosity of alumni like you, we are able to serve 96,000 students and 41,000 faculty and staff **on every campus, in every field of study, from anywhere in the world.** We also lend to the public across the Commonwealth and serve as a model to peer institutions across the country.
This January, your gifts facilitated the opening of the Tombros and McWhirter Knowledge Commons in Pattee Library. The Knowledge Commons is a perfect example of how philanthropy is transforming our Libraries to spaces that better prepare our students for the work spaces and technology they will encounter when they enter their professions. But, **we still have work to do. We need an additional $800,000 in donations to complete this project.**



I hope you continue to invest in the Libraries, one of the shining hallmarks of this great university.
Barbara I. Dewey
Dean of University Libraries and Scholarly Communications

Condition 4: No Amplifiers, Anchor

Dear Mr. _____,
Thank you for supporting the University Libraries. We're proud to be recognized as one of the top ten research libraries in North America, public or private.
The Penn State Libraries subscribes to more than 110,000 online journals and logs more than 7 million visits to 23 campuses annually. Last year, we added over 14,000 books to our 5.8 million volumes. And thanks to investments in technology, and the generosity of alumni like you, we are able to serve 96,000 students and 41,000 faculty and staff on every campus, in every field of study, from anywhere in the world. We also lend to the public across the Commonwealth and serve as a model to peer institutions across the country.
This January, your gifts facilitated the opening of the Tombros and McWhirter Knowledge Commons in Pattee Library. The Knowledge Commons is a perfect example of how philanthropy is transforming our Libraries to spaces that better prepare our students for the workspaces and technology they will encounter when they enter their professions. But, we still have work to do. We need an additional $800,000 in donations to complete this project.



I hope you continue to invest in the Libraries, one of the shining hallmarks of this great university.
Barbara I. Dewey
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Procedure

The emails were constructed to remain as close to the original control version of the email as possible, to ensure that any differences in donor response that may arise would be attributable to the independent variable(s). After extensive meetings with the staff of the University Libraries and Office of Annual Giving, it was established that all of the email versions sent out were similar to and consistent with those sent in previous years, and as such our control version of the email could be relied upon as a baseline with relevance to usual practices.

We counted the list of recipients (which was in no particular order by donor ID number) off by fours (with all of the "1s" in the first group, the "2s" in the second group, etc.), in order to produce four participant groups with consistent numbers of donors in each group. We then ran an

analysis comparing each of these groups to ensure consistency across the groups in terms of gender (the one background variable made available from the Libraries).

Gender by the Four Email Solicitations			
Version	Male	Female	**Total**
Control (Amplifier, No Thermometer)	696	609	**1305**
No Amplifier, No Thermometer	618	626	**1244**
Amplifier, Thermometer	651	632	**1284**
No Amplifier, Thermometer	682	619	**1303**

Table 1

A chi-square test suggests that the assignment was effective, at least in terms of comparable rates of males and females across conditions. Thus, the results suggest the study could proceed without concern over possible differences in donor response due to gender. The analysis indicates that there was no statistically significant variation in gender ratios among the four groups, $\chi^2(3) = 4.081$, $p = 0.253$.

After the emails were sent out simultaneously on February 28, 2012 at 3:00pm, responses were recorded until March 23, 2012 and coded based on how many, if any, links the recipients clicked through in the email, as well as whether they unsubscribed from the listserv. These resulting data were subsequently analyzed according to which condition the participants were in, and were tested for main effects as well as by individual condition in order to assess which factors may have affected the donation behavior.

Results

The impact of the different solicitation versions on donor responses was assessed using chi-square tests. In one analyses, the four individual solicitations were compared in terms of the relative number of click-through responses. The results are presented in Table 2, and show no significant difference in click-throughs among the four emails. For each the four email versions, the number of recipients who clicked one or more hyperlinks in the email is listed under the "Recipients Clicked" column, while the number of those who opened the email but did not is listed under the "Recipients Did Not Click" column.

Difference in Click-Throughs Between Email Versions			
Version	Recipients Clicked	Recipients Did Not Click	**Total**
Control (Amplifier, No Thermometer)	43	1262	**1305**
No Amplifier, No Thermometer	35	1209	**1244**
Amplifier, Thermometer	34	1250	**1284**
No Amplifier, Thermometer	32	1271	**1303**

Table 2

The chi-square test of independence did not approach statistical significance, suggesting that any variation in click-through responses was due to chance, $\chi^2(3) = 1.849$, $p = .604$.

A planned set of chi-square tests were also conducted to determine whether there were any main effects from either the anchor heuristic condition or the amplifier condition. The results of the overall test suggest these tests are not necessary, but they were conducted in case they could provide additional insights into the results. In these tests, which correspond to the main effect analyses of an Analysis of Variance, the four email conditions were combined into two groups corresponding to one of the independent variables. The first of these tests compared

responses based on whether or not the email message contained an anchoring image (ignoring whether an amplifier was present or not). In the second test responses were based on whether or not amplifiers were used (ignoring the presence or absence of the anchoring image).

Main Effects of Amplifier on Click-Throughs			
Version	Recipients Clicked Through	Recipients Did Not Click Through	**Total**
No Amplifier	67	2480	**2547**
Amplifier	77	2512	**2589**
Total	**144**	**4992**	**5136**

Table 3

Main Effects of Anchoring Thermometer on Click-Throughs			
Version	Recipients Clicked Through	Recipients Did Not Click Through	**Total**
No Thermometer	78	2471	**2549**
Thermometer	66	2521	**2587**
Total	**144**	**4992**	**5136**

Table 4

The results of the chi-square two-way table test for click-throughs are statistically non-significant and do not support my hypothesis. For the anchoring main effect, χ^2 (1) = 1.220, p = 0.269. For the amplifier main effect, χ^2 (1) = 0.556, p = 0.456. See Tables 2 and 3 for details.

Data were also recorded for how many recipients of each email elected to unsubscribe from the listserv, indicating that they no longer wished to receive these solicitation emails. Chi-

square tests were performed for the four versions compared to each other individually, as well as examining main effects.

Differences in Unsubscribing Between Email Versions			
Version	Recipients Unsubscribed	Recipients Did Not Unsubscribe	**Total**
Control (Amplifier, No Thermometer)	33	1272	**1305**
No Amplifier, No Thermometer	39	1205	**1244**
Amplifier, Thermometer	26	1258	**1284**
No Amplifier, Thermometer	31	1272	**1303**

Table 5

The chi-square analysis shows that the differences are not statistically insignificant, χ^2 (1) = 3.258, p = 0.353.

Main effects were also tested, with the data on unsubscribing summarized in Tables 6 and 7. The results of the chi-square test for unsubscribing are statistically non-significant and do not support my hypothesis. For the anchoring main effect χ^2 (1) = 2.024 and p = 0.155, and for the amplifier main effect, χ^2 (1) = 1.156 and p = 0.282.

Main Effects of Amplifier on Unsubscribing			
Version	Recipients Unsubscribed	Recipients Did Not Unsubscribe	**Total**
No Amplifier	70	2477	**2547**
Amplifier	59	2530	**2589**
Total	**129**	**5007**	**5136**

Table 6

Main Effects of Anchoring Thermometer on Unsubscribing			
Version	Recipients Clicked Through	Recipients Did Not Click Through	**Total**
No Thermometer	72	2477	**2549**
Thermometer	57	2530	**2587**
Total	**129**	**5007**	**5136**

Table 7

Discussion

Overall, the results for click-throughs and unsubscribing do not support my hypotheses. Nevertheless, the fact that the results do not show the anchoring image making a significant difference in donor response is not necessarily in contradiction to the literature. Desmet (2003) suggested that providing donors with an idea of how much to give may encourage them to give more. However, in this study no specific amount was provided in terms of a recommended gift size, but rather the thermometer image served as a big-picture indication of how much money was needed in total for the libraries to reach their next goal. Showing readers the thermometer image should have had an effect more like the one described in Kraut and Resnick's (2008) article, where normative pressure was responsible for the positive response to seeing that many others had already given. However, that is not what was observed in my study. One potential explanation for this discrepancy is that, while the thermometer showed how much money had been donated toward the goal described, it did not indicate how many individual gifts had been given. Possibly a more explicit emphasis on how many donors had already contributed, and perhaps even how much, would have yielded results closer to those predicted. Alternatively, thermometers may be more effective in charitable campaigns when the potential contributor can see the total increasing over time, showing that a growing number of others have given.

The presence or absence of amplifiers in the solicitation did not affect responses, either. There are several possible explanations for this result, one being that I only applied one variable out of the several described as part of an "optimal direct mail design" (Vriens et al., 1998), leaving out "a post scriptum with the summary of the letter, signed by a professor," which were the two aspects of the optimal mailing described in Vriens's article that could have been applied to an email solicitation. These additional variables were not used in the test because of the need

to remain as close to the University Libraries' usual mailings, as well as the need to keep the sample size for each group as large as possible. Knowing the low response rate solicitation emails usually get, dividing the group as few times as possible was ideal.

Additionally, the only amplifier used was bold text; there was no italicizing, underlining, or change in color. The use of more amplifiers in the amplifier condition may have led to larger difference between it and the non-amplified text. The email was also a short one; amplification of certain parts of it may not have appeared much differently than the parts that contained the hyperlinks for donors to click. In future studies, the different versions should be designed to be more explicitly different.

A final factor could have affected the likelihood of the influence of both independent variables. That is, those who give (especially major gifts) are usually in the habit of donating every year, and the amount that they donate remains more or less constant, an observation that is supported in Bag and Roy's (2008) article, which discusses the habitual nature of many long-time donors. Because this study used a list of previous donors, many were not on the cusp of indecision. Uncertainty makes it much easier for people to be influenced by heuristics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and it would have been a different process entirely to design this study to target those who were unsure whether to give this year.

The absence of significance differences across the variations in terms of unsubscribing rates, while disappointing, is not necessarily discouraging. Opting out of a listserv is a more effortful response than simply ignoring an email, so it can at least be said that the alterations did not cause anything more than the same disinclination that can be expected during one of these campaigns. The libraries get a certain portion of people unsubscribing every time they send emails out, as evidenced by the fact that the control version of the email prompted as many

unsubscriptions as the other versions.

Looking forward, research on email solicitations should be done using as large of a sample as possible, since the rates at which people get as far as opening them are so low. As much should be known about the population as possible, including past donation behavior; with more time and resources, further research could have been done into this study's participants and their donation behavior since giving for the first time. Ideally, future research will also extend beyond a single email to look at patterns of giving over time. In order to study the effects of heuristics at play in fundraising solicitations, the surrounding circumstances should be as neutral as possible. This year has been a particularly polarizing one for Penn State and its supporters, and it is possible that in light of the scandal surrounding Jerry Sandusky, people have made up their minds already to continue supporting Penn State or not. In this study, there simply may not the kind of ambiguity and uncertainty that enables behavior to most easily be swayed by subtle suggestions and priming.

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