

Curing Donor Fatigue

The Search for Fulfillment

Giving, at its highest levels, is gratifying for the donor. I have seen it for myself countless times during my two decades working in philanthropy. The words “joy” and “pleasure” come to mind, but they don’t quite capture the experience. The most generous people I know give back because it’s incredibly fulfilling, as if philanthropy were a cup of hot chocolate shared with your loved ones while sitting before the fireplace on a cold winter’s night. It just feels like this is the way it was meant to be.

I have had the honor of knowing many of our community’s true philanthropists. Indeed, without exception, these most generous of souls draw deep personal satisfaction from their charity. Done right, philanthropy is a remarkably heartening experience.

That’s why I find it so frustrating when I hear the talk of “donor fatigue.” By definition, fatigue is weariness from prolonged exertion. The phrase conjures up an image of donors straining under a yoke as they pull forward the burdensome wagon of charity. It doesn’t have to be that way. In

my experience, giving is anything but a burden. Giving is fulfilling.

Yet I trust that the people who talk about donor fatigue are honestly expressing their feelings. So how do we reconcile these two different pictures of charitable giving?

The answer cannot be that Door County is overburdened with a high number of charities. While it is a fact that Door County residents give a higher percentage of discretionary income to charity than any other county in Wisconsin, the dirty little secret is that Wisconsin ranks 45th on the list of most generous states. According to the statistics in the 2012 “How America Gives” study by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Door County is by far the most generous county in Wisconsin, but Wisconsin is one of the least generous states in the nation.

Door County residents give an average of 4.1 percent of their discretionary income to charity (discretionary income is what’s left after housing, food, clothing, and other living expenses are deducted). Door County’s generosity is the highest in Wisconsin,

but it’s still well below the national average of 4.7 percent. If every person in Door County gave 15 percent more to charity next year, that would only bring us to the national average. If we truly wanted Door County to become one of the most generous communities in America, we’d all have to double the amount we donate to charity.

Thus, we cannot say the feeling of donor fatigue is because we’re already giving away too much money to too many charities. Clearly, we have some room to grow.

Still, for some, that feeling of donor fatigue is real. And it cannot simply be dismissed. I believe that donor fatigue begins when a person’s generosity is not well matched to their passion.

Cindy Weber says that we “can’t expect everyone to connect equally to our cause, as hard as it may be for you to believe.” Weber is the vice president of mission development at the Door County YMCA. She says, “There are some individuals who may not care about dogs and cats, or kids or seniors or art programs or music or preservation or history. That does not make



Illustration by Ryan Miller.

them a bad person, it just means it doesn't make them a committed donor to your cause."

Yet we who work in charity often try to make everyone a donor to our organization. Mark Kuntsman, executive director of Midsummer's Music says, "The cause perhaps of donor fatigue [is] when every nonprofit organization assumes that the donor base is everyone that has a home in Door County."

Too often, charities aggressively seek out affluent people in the community and ask them to give simply because they have the ability to do so. Not enough effort is spent trying to understand why a specific cause might be a good match for a particular donor.

"I think the hardest thing to do as a fundraiser is to listen," says Weber. "We tend to want to tell our story, share our outcomes and talk about our impact, all of which are important, but often what we really need to do when visiting with a prospective donor is to shut up. Amazing things can happen when it is not us talking, but the prospective donor."

Laurel Hauser, director of charitable giving at the Door County Land Trust, likes to begin her visits with donors with a series of questions. "Why did you first become a supporter? What aspect of our work excites you most? What would you like to see us do if funds were not an issue? What do you see our organization looking like in 10 years, 50 years?" Hauser says of her donors, "We want something in the world to be different than it is and we are relying on each other, we need each other, to make it so." Understanding what it is that a donor wants to accomplish, and how the charity is working toward that goal, is key to making the donor's experience meaningful and rewarding.

Of course, a charity understanding and articulating how their work furthers a passion of the donor is only the beginning. Ultimately, the first contribution is just the start of a relationship. This generous person has given the charity their trust. It is then the responsibility of the organization to live up to the faith that has been placed in them.

As Weber notes, "The challenge comes in that we can't, as a nonprofit,

only communicate with our donors once a year when we send them a letter asking for money and expect there to be an emotional connection." Yet, this is often what happens. Too many charities only talk with their friends and donors when they want something from them.

"We try to keep our donors informed of what is happening at Sunshine House," says Jim Meyer, its CEO. "We have also changed somewhat with having more pictures in the newsletter showing our programs and services so the donors stay up to date with what is going on. We feel that helps to keep the donors engaged and helps to make them feel their donations are providing programs and services that they can see and hopefully value."

Pam Seiler, executive director of the Volunteer Center of Door County, echoes those sentiments. "Most frequently, I find that our donors are energized by successful projects and heightened awareness of our organization. I think they appreciate knowing that we are working diligently to use our resources effectively."

At the Land Trust, they try to go beyond simply building a relationship between the donor and the organization. They also emphasize building ties between the donors themselves. "If you have individual donors with strong emotional ties and you get them together to meet each other, you build a community with a strong emotional tie and that's when things really get done," says Hauser. "That's when the magic happens."

Donor fatigue is a real issue, but it is not new, nor is it unique to Door County. "It seems like [donor fatigue is] one of those terms we use to say that

'it used to be easier' in some regard," says Alan Kopischke, executive director of Birch Creek. "But I don't know that we are experiencing a 'donor fatigue' phenomenon that is unique to right now or to right here."

Indeed, donor fatigue, like any kind of fatigue, is a result of people carrying a burden for too long. When the charities you're supporting are neither informing you of how your money is being used nor inspiring you with their mission, giving can indeed feel like a burden.

Donor fatigue is like the refrain from an old song that comes to mind

whenever those of us who work in charity aren't doing our jobs well. It's when we're not listening to our donors. When we're not sharing with them the results of our good work. In other words, when we're taking our donors for granted.

But when we charities treat our donors with gratitude and respect, giving is an incredibly fulfilling experience.

"I believe that people give because it feels good," says Weber. "I can't remember anyone ever giving me a check with a frown on their face."



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