

The Effects of Time Spent on Rapport Building: A Predictive Analysis of a Higher Education

Call Center

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Abstract

The forming of a relational connection between a caller and prospective donor in telephone fundraising is a vital step in successful engagement of charitable participation. This study aimed to fill a gap in current fundraising research by analyzing the direct connection between time spent building rapport and fundraising success. Data from a higher education call center in the Western United States was used to conduct a standard linear regression analyses. The amount of time spent building rapport was found to significantly influence payment type and amount of a philanthropic donation. A greater amount of time spent building rapport lead to both a more desired method of payment and a higher donation by the prospect. These findings have important implications for the use and implementation of rapport building in higher education fundraising.

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Due to reduced levels of public funding to universities, reliance on other forms of income has become increasingly necessary for higher education institutions (Mitchell & Leachman, 2015). Universities must more heavily rely on philanthropic income for supporting and sustaining their campus. A university call center is stationed within the annual giving department, and meant to extend outreach potential and ability (Cloud, 2017). Persuading alumni to engage in charitable participation enables university advancement. Gifts to the university through a call center are usually facilitated by student callers to help support various department funding needs and student services (Cloud, 2017). Telephone fundraising involves many communication tools, the most prominent of which is building rapport with a prospective donor (Fearn, 2009). Rapport is a difficult variable to conceptualize. However, rapport is contextual which makes it difficult to measure even though it has profound effects on the success of a call in practice.

This study looks at the relationship between time spent on rapport building and donation success. As for any form of philanthropic giving, a higher monetary amount is desired, and the mark of a more successful donation. Understanding the effect of time, which is indeed money when considering employee wages and outreach potential, can provide insightful strategies for conducting fundraising in a higher education call center.

Literature Review

Technology Mediated Communication

Joseph Walther's (1992) social information processing theory proposes that in computer-mediated environments, developing interpersonal connections may require more time than

traditional face-to-face communication. According to this theory, the negative interpersonal consequences of computer mediated communication (CMC) are not due to the lack of nonverbal and relational cues but to time restriction. Walther's (1992) perspective dictates that due to cue limitations, CMC takes more time to convey messages, but is still just as effective. Social processing theory is the theoretical framework for this study and the explanations that follow. In a seminal study, Walther, Anderson, and Park (1994) used meta-analysis to explore the impact of technologically mediated communication on interpersonal interactions. While their study focused on computer mediated communication, the overall results of technological mediation clearly indicated time restriction accounts for the interpersonal ineffectiveness of most CMC interactions. Through the lens of social information processing theory, Walther and colleagues found the same interpersonal effects as expected in face to face communication were had CMC when extended time was given to the condition.

Walther and Parks (2002) note that computer mediated communication is a broad term that encompasses many mediums. Telephone communication specifically lacks many nonverbal and relation cues from the absence of a visual input. Sinaiko (1963) discovered negotiators were able to converge positions significantly more in face-to-face communication than over the telephone. The technologically mediated communication negatively affected the process. Walther and colleagues' (1994) analysis showed that merely having more time to interact will increase social communication because it takes longer to become accustomed to one another when communicating on a medium lacking efficient social cues. When building rapport for fundraising purposes, social communication is highly desirable as it deepens the connection between the caller and the prospect. It is on this connection that rapport building rests.

Rapport Building

Rapport can be defined as “a positive emotional connection” (Buskist & Saville, 2001, p. 13). In this study, rapport building is measured by the length of a call. It is difficult to quantify an emotional connection, however the longer one spends communicating on a medium lacking sufficient social cues, the stronger the interpersonal connection can be (Walter, Anderson, & Park 1994). Building rapport is about forming relationships by establishing back and forth communication to identify common attitudes and values (Buskist & Saville, 2001). Internationally acclaimed fundraiser Burnett (1992) argued that dramatic increases in overall profitability of fundraising may be achieved through an effort to increase donor loyalty. He believes that to achieve this, a focus on relationships needs to be utilized, through building rapport. Burnett (1992) views developing relational connections as essential increasing donor support and retention. Indeed, research shows that donors react adversely to hasty solicitation procedures (Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009).

Rapport building may be one way to increase donor satisfaction, and by default, increase donations. Additionally, Hall and colleagues (2009) note that amount of perceived personal relevance on the part of the donor increases both their donation likelihood and amount. In fact, donors reporting more motives for giving in general made more and larger gifts than those who reported fewer. A longer call may allow for more personal connections to past experiences, which could potentially stir up more motivations to give; and therefore donation size. Making different motivations for philanthropic activity explicit takes more time, but can increase willingness to give. Too narrow an appeal may limit the amount a donor is willing to give by not utilizing combinations of incentives.

Another factor to consider when soliciting donations through technologically mediated channels is the opinions of the donor (Andorfer & Otte, 2013). Perceived allocation

effectiveness, and therefore recipient benefit, is an important variable for increasing donor generosity. In fact, donors refrain from giving if they lack optimism toward the effectiveness of aid (Atkinson & Eastwood, 2007). Due to its major role in motivating charitable giving, Andorfer and Otte (2013) advise organizations to make their activity and needs known to stimulate generosity. The more time a student caller spends discussing the actual happenings of the campus, the more clear the effectiveness and impact of the programs being discussed can be made. The lack of optimism from a donor is significant because Sargeant (2001) found that a major reason donors “drop-off” is a loss of connection or memory with the organization. The more favorable the perception of communications held, the longer the giving relationship. Additionally, Lindahl and Conley (2002) assert that building stronger relationships with donors should prevent a loss of connection and therefore monetary support.

Another important note from Andorfer and Otte’s (2013) analyses is that respondents’ hypothetical willingness to donate was much higher for their own country. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals organize themselves into groups to provide a sense of social identity. By minimizing differences within a category, or in-group, and maximizing difference between categories, or out-groups, one forms a sense a belonging and stability. Preferential treatment is given to members of one’s in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This generosity with one’s in-group may also be applicable to alumni supporting their school. The emotional connection formed from building rapport (Buskist & Saville, 2001) requires a longer amount of time over the phone to properly form an interpersonal relationship (Walter, Anderson, & Park 1994). Time must be spent reminding a prospect of their part in the in-group to again feel connected to it. Recalling the alumni part of their identity by connecting with

current student may increase willingness to give, as Andorfer and Otte's (2013) analysis suggests.

Time, ergo rapport building, also increases flexibility in donation amount (Labarge & Stinson, 2013). When donors are motivated to give more than they had budgeted for, they rework a mental budget to account for an increased donation. This malleability is achieved by either mentally borrowing money from another planned budget or justifying the donation as fitting into multiple budget categories. These findings bolster the idea that rapport building leads to an increased donation as donors rework mental budgets. Allowing unrestricted time to discuss other budget categories will make the money mentally allocated to those categories applicable to a donation. It motivates a donor to access those budget resources to increase the amount of a gift. The more budget categories discussed, the more potential budget resources mentally available for use by the donor.

University Fundraising Call Centers

A higher education call center in the Western United States was used as a case study for this project. It is run by a staff of around 50 callers, 5 student managers, and overseen by the head of annual giving and a communication specialist in the annual giving department. The call center places particular emphasis on the building of lasting relationships with prospective and current donors. The student callers are trained to only proceed with a call if the prospect has time to engage in a conversation. Though commission is still a segment of the student caller's income, larger compensation is provided through hourly wages to reinforce this emphasis on relational connection. Conventions and seminars are also regularly attended by the head staff members to ensure training methods and calling procedures are up to date and in line with other higher education call centers.

When soliciting donations for a university, rapport building is achieved by discussing past experiences at the school and the current happenings of the campus and its students. It is the most essential step in fundraising, and the only open to time fluctuations. For the call center used in this study, 5 primary steps of the call process are outlined in the training manual. The first step is the “introduction”, wherein the caller identifies themselves as a student calling for the university and requests permission to engage the prospect further. If allowed to do so, the caller then enters the “engagement” step, using open ended probing questions to build rapport. In traditional use, this is the only step to allow for deviation in caller performance time. Varying call durations are directly related to the amount of time spent building rapport, making it a valid measure of rapport building for this study. The third step in the call is “case for giving”, utilizing set phrases to secure a general commitment to a donation. The following “negotiation” step solidifies an amount then method of payment. Finally, the “formal close” involves a scripted confirmation of payment and expression of gratitude. Given the rigidity of current call procedures with all steps except the engagement, examining the time spent building rapport as a predictor of success (i.e., a donation) is warranted.

As discussed above, a higher donation amount is more desirable and the mark of a more successful call. The method of payment is another factor to consider. For the call center used in this study, the two options for giving are an immediate donation or a pledged donation. An immediate donation is the processing of a credit or debit card the PayPal by the student employee at the time of the call. A pledged donation is a promise by the donor to return a pledge card sent to them in the mail with a check for the agreed upon amount. Payment method is not discussed until after a dollar amount has been agreed to. This allows dollar amount to have an effect on method but not necessarily method on amount. The credit card method is more desirable because

the funds can be available for use immediately, it saves postage and processing costs, and ensures pledge fulfillment. According to Lindahl (1994), only about 70% of pledges are ever fulfilled. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the fundraiser to push for an immediate donation via a credit card. Donors, especially the older alumni, may be initially unwilling to provide sensitive information over the phone to a stranger. Trust and perceived risk have strong impacts on purchasing decisions by individuals (Kim, Ferrin & Rao, 2008). The trust and acceptance that must be fostered, through building rapport, before this type of information can be transferred takes time to form (Walter, Anderson, & Park 1994). Building rapport may increase the likelihood of a donor giving via a credit card.

Based on the aforementioned research, it is clear that there are many variables involved in caller success when conducting fundraising over the phone. A central aspect to allowing all of the natural connections to be built and relationships fostered is time (Walther 1992; Walther et al. 1994). As highlighted previously, underlying Walther's (1992) social information processing theory, is the need for more time to build rapport or make interpersonal connections when communicating on certain mediums. Attempting to generate motivations and incentives to give (Hall et al. 2009), demonstrating recipient benefit and cultivating alumni identity (Andorfer & Otte, 2013), and pulling in multiple mental budget resources (Labarge & Stinson, 2013) takes time. There is a relationship between trust and a propensity to donate (Sargeant & Lee, 2002). Building rapport increases interpersonal connection and therefore trust (Buskist & Saville, 2001). Yet, this connection takes extended time to form over the phone (Walter, Anderson, & Park 1994). Time, by extension, should then increase trust and therefore donation habits. This study seeks to bridge a current gap in research by looking directly at the effect of time on donation amount and payment method.

In the call center used in this study, the success of a donation is traditionally measured on two levels. First, the payment method classified as an immediate donation (via a credit or debit card) instead of a pledged donation. The benefits of this method are outlined above. Second, the dollar amount of the donation. The higher the dollar amount, the more successful the donation. Using this model for success, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Call duration will positively predict an immediate donation.

H2: Call duration will positively predict donation amount.

Method

Sample & Data Extraction

A sample ($N = 600$) was drawn from call records using the tele-fundraising software SmartCall. The sample drawn included calls from a large, Western university donation call center. With this software, lists of prospects to call are compiled regularly by an administrator. Call recipients must be university alumni, reside in the United States' Pacific Time Zone, and have donated \$1-1,000 during the last three fiscal years. Donors from this sample were both female ($N = 415$) and male ($N = 185$), ranged in graduation year from 1940 to 2014, and graduated from any college on the university campus. Employees of the call center made these calls over a thirty-day period in 2016. The sample ($N = 600$) includes only call recipients who pledged or donated.

Measurement

Rapport building. Rapport building was measured by call duration, recorded in minutes. Call Start time and call stop time were used to calculate the total call duration, ranging from 1 minute to 54 minutes.

Donation success. The success of a donation was assessed on two levels, donation amount and payment type.

Donation amount. Donation amount was used to measure donation success with a higher dollar amount marking a more successful donation. Amounts ranged from \$10 to \$1,000. For coding purposes, the donation amounts were rounded to the nearest dollar.

Payment type. Payment type consisted of two options: (*immediate donation*, via a credit or debit card processed through PayPal by the employee at the time of the call, or *pledged donation*, via a promise by the donor to return a pledge card sent to them in the mail with a check for the agreed upon amount.) This was used to measure donation success by noting an immediate donation ($N = 210$) was more successful than a pledged donation ($N = 390$).

Results

Influence of Time

Standard linear regression analyses assessed the influence of rapport building on fundraising call success. Hypothesis 1 posited that call duration would significantly predict an immediate donation. The results supported this hypothesis. Call duration had a significant ($p < .001$), moderate correlation with payment type ($r = .366$). In preliminary linear regression analyses, call duration accounted for 13% of the variation in payment type, $F(1, 598) = 92.702$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .133$, indicating significant ($p < .001$) positive influence in the regression ($\beta = .366$, $t = 9.628$).

Hypothesis 2 posited that call duration would significantly predict donation amount. This hypothesis was also supported. Call duration had a significant ($p = .001$), weak correlation with donation amount ($r = .136$). Using regression analyses, call duration accounted for 2% of the variation in donation amount, $F(1, 598) = 11.203$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .017$. Though the influence was

weak, call duration still had significant ($p = .001$), positive influence in the regression ($\beta = .136$, $t = 3.347$).

Discussion

Previous research has drawn connections between time and the forming of interpersonal connections when using technology mediated communication (Walter, Anderson, & Park 1994), between interpersonal connection and increased levels of trust (Buskist & Saville, 2001), and between trust and the propensity to donate (Sargeant & Lee, 2002; Kim, Ferrin & Rao, 2008). Surprisingly little research has addressed a direct connection between time and donation success. This exploratory study was designed to forge this gap to provide useable findings for calling methods and strategies in higher education fundraising. I hoped to learn what effect, if any, the amount of time spent building rapport has on a resulting donation. The findings from this study have important implications for the use and implementation of rapport building in higher education fundraising.

Consistent with previous research (Walther 1992; Walther, Anderson, & Park 1994; Sargeant & Lee, 2002; Buskist & Saville, 2001), the current findings showed that call duration significantly predicted an immediate donation. A longer amount of time spent building rapport with a prospect lead to a more desired method of payment. This payment type, as contrasted with a pledged donation, allows immediate use of the funds and ensures pledge fulfillment. For the call center used in this study, numerous financial incentives are in place to encourage callers to secure immediate donations on a credit or debit card, due to the significant benefits of this method of payment.

Future research should extend investigation of payment type by following up with pledged donations to analyze fulfillment. The benefits time has on payment type may not be lost

when a prospect elects to pay via a pledged donation. A longer time spent building rapport, and therefore stronger interpersonal connection, may also increase the likelihood a donor will fulfill their promise to send a check back for the agreed upon amount. Further study of pledge fulfillment will help gain a fuller understanding of the benefits, or lack thereof, increased time has on donation as a whole.

The influence time has on propensity to give through direct means also has meaningful implications for a call center. Merely engaging with a prospect for a longer period of time increases their likelihood to acquiesce to a caller's request of payment through a credit or debit card. This immediate donation is highly desired by both the caller and the call center, and is more likely to be given when more time is spent building rapport. Higher education call centers can use this information to more effectively train employees for success, benefiting both the caller's commission and the universities philanthropic funding wages.

The findings also showed that call duration significantly predicted donation amount. Though the influence was weak, time was a significant factor in the dollar amount of the donation. A higher monetary amount translates to more funding for the programs supported by the donor, and for university advancement as a whole. Increasing charitable participation is a main objective of the student callers from the call center used in this study, and understanding the effect time has on this goal is important to note. Higher education call centers can utilize this knowledge to increase participation in both new and existing donors.

Though time was found to be a significant factor in predicting donation amount, the influence was weaker than expected given previous research (Hall et al. 2009; Andorfer & Otte, 2013; Labarge & Stinson, 2013). It may be that the current findings were a result of the lack of spread in donation amount. Only a few donations ($N = 12$) were over \$300, yet the largest

donation was \$1,000. This leaves a large gap in input for the higher end of charitable support. This end, arguably so, is perhaps more important to explore as it has a higher effect on university advancement potential. Future studies should aim to encompass a wider range of donation levels to further explore the effect time has on philanthropic participation.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that are important to note, and warrant further research. First, the data used for the study was derived from a single call center on a university campus in the Western United States. The student callers attend that university and the prospects were alumni from it. Future research should aim to broaden the sample to multiple call centers spread geographically, and to different forms of fundraising calling. Though higher education fundraising represents a significant portion of telephone fundraising, applications to other areas could have great utility. Forming a more representative sample would help strengthen and widen applications of findings.

Another limitation of this study is the measurement of rapport building as call duration. Though the call center used in this study employs a rigid call process in all steps except rapport, the call duration alone may not fully capture the involved and conceptual nature of building rapport. Ideally, future research should examine the influence of time through transcription of the calls in the sample. This approach would provide a more exact numerical value for not only the time difference between calls but also a suggestion for the ideal amount of time that should be spent building rapport. This length recommendation could translate to direct utility for a call center. Discovering a possible decline of improved success with time could best match efficiency with call success for the productivity of a call center.

Lastly, although the sample used for this study was sizable ($N = 600$), it was comprised solely of calls that were successful in receiving a donation. The addition of a control group of calls that were unsuccessful in contracting a donation would provide the opportunity for comparison of results. The effect time has on unsuccessful calls warrants further research. Future studies should explore this connection.

Conclusion

This study aimed to bridge a gap in current research to investigate the influence of time spent building rapport on donation success. Time was found to significantly influence both payment type and donation amount. Findings were consistent with previous research and emphasized the utility of providing renewed attention to building rapport when conducting fundraising over the phone. Higher education call centers may use these findings to implement better and more effective training programs that focus on improvement of the relational connection between caller and prospect. Future research should further explore the direct effect time has on a donation by looking at pledge fulfillment, the effect on unsuccessful calls, and a wider range of philanthropic giving areas and donation levels.

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