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GUIDE TO
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One Hundred and One Donations

It may be better to give than to receive, but being a benefactor can also be exhausting.

By Stephen Henderson

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was walking through Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square on a summer afternoon with my oldest sister, Deborah. Up ahead, we spotted a shirtless and suntanned panhandler who was a fixture in this neighborhood back then. As usual, he was cheerfully inebriated and loudly seeking donations for what he called his "buy me a beer" fund.

Deborah is a charitable soul who's worked in nonprofit organizations for most of her career and regularly donates time and money to a variety of causes. I knew, however, that this begging for booze really bothered her; she felt it was an insult to those who were truly needy. As the vagrant stretched out his hand, I expected my sister to glide serenely past, ignoring him. Instead, she suddenly blurted out: "Leave me alone! I won't buy you a beer now or ever. *Never!*"

I was shocked and couldn't understand why she was so upset. Today, as I sometimes hesitate to answer the telephone for fear of yet another heartrending solicitation (my alma mater! Greenpeace! Hillary!), I'll think of my sister. And when it seems that at nearly every dinner party I attend, someone will corner me with an urgent plea that I help stop global warming or encourage modern dance, I'll recall her frustrated outburst. As Deborah was, I'm sometimes ready to snap from donor's fatigue.

According to the Chicago-based American Institute of Philanthropy (AIP), there are more than 1.8 million nonprofit organizations in this country. As the government continues to cut social-service budgets, appeals from the private sector are becoming increasingly clamorous. Donate to any, though, and you can soon expect to hear from many more, as lists compiled by one organization are soon sold to others. Contrary to the anguished speech Portia makes to Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, sometimes the quality of mercy *is* strained.

Typical, perhaps, is the experience of Robin Laughlin, a photographer who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "Santa Fe is a small town, but I get invitations to probably four to six events a month,"



she says. "It's because I used to use the 'shotgun' approach to charity and give small amounts of money to all the local causes. I thought this would be a great way to spread the wealth, but it ended up creating a whole lot more invitations to a whole lot more benefits. Some of them now come from causes I'd never support, places that even make me angry."

Once you're visible as someone who gives, it's also often assumed that you have access to the purse strings of others. Gillian Minter, who is a vice president of the Women's Committee for the Central Park Conservancy, in New York City, knows this only too well. "When they see you're effective in one group, people target you and want you to get involved in their organizations," she says. "After I discovered I was good at raising money and that I could make a difference, I realized it was better to be fully committed to only a few things and that I needed to focus."

The cure for donor's fatigue is not to stop giving but to give more carefully, believes Daniel Borochoff, AIP president. "People are far too passive with regard to their charitable donations," he says. "They give because the phone rings or a gala invitation arrives in the mail. Instead, they should be introspective, reflect upon what their goals and ideals are and then come up with a plan. If you have more confidence in what you want to support, you can more easily tell others that their proposals don't fit your priorities."

Trent Stamp, head of Charity Navigator, America's largest independent charity evaluator, based in Mahwah, New Jersey,

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agrees. "I am amazed by the number of wealthy, powerful people who have highly organized plans for their businesses, investments and retirement but leave philanthropy to the whim of whoever contacts them," he says.

Stamp advises that it is much better to thank callers for contacting you but explain that you can't give to charity A, since you are aggressively supporting charity B. Be polite, but only to a point. "No one wants to look stingy or selfish, but it's okay to reject people," he says.

Gracefully rebuffing a stranger's pitch is one thing, but what about when it's your next-door neighbor, nephew or client who wants you to support a pet project? In these situations, it's important to distinguish between different forms of benefaction. There is true altruism, whereby you give from the heart, because you want to do something good, or "repair the world," in Borochoff's phrase. Also important, though, are more self-interested ways of giving, what Stamp calls "charitable quid pro quo." This phenomenon is especially prevalent among the very affluent, or in smaller communities where involvement in a fundraising campaign for the local university or museum can allow for personal as well as professional advancement.

"Everybody wants to get in good with other people," Stamp explains. "Even Donald Trump needs backers and investors. So he will give to their causes in order to curry favor. There is nothing wrong with this; it is an important part of philanthropy."

"Charity can be about connections and whom you know," admits Laughlin, who now focuses her philanthropy on the Farmers' Market Institute in Santa Fe. "If somebody buys a ticket to my benefit, I feel that I have to buy one for hers."

Maybe. Maybe not. This is where it takes some soul-searching and intestinal fortitude. Ask yourself: does your social standing or future business success depend on your making a donation or lend-

ing your name, time or influence to a particular organization? If so, write the check for as much as you can afford. ("When the boss's daughter is a Girl Scout, even if you're on a diet, you buy the cookies," jokes Borochoff.) If not, however, then have the courage of your convictions. Just because your best friend wants you to support PETA or the ballet, it doesn't mean that you have to. Develop the strength to tell him you've decided to put your money elsewhere. And guess what? You may actually gain some respect in the process.

"As a fundraiser, I much prefer it when someone tells me, 'I can't do it right now; I am overcommitted.' This is far better than if they say yes or maybe, and then ultimately don't come through," concludes Minitzer. "Someone told me once that the people who give the most money are also the best at saying no." ❖

When You Have to Decline

- **Gird yourself.** People often regard their favorite charities with great affection and can become offended when others don't support them. Prepare yourself for that reaction.
- **Be realistic.** It's preferable to risk alienating an acquaintance you encounter twice a year rather than a friend you see twice a week.
- **Show interest.** Although you haven't donated, you can still express concern and curiosity.
- **Give elsewhere.** You are not a miser when you decline to support a particular organization. Instead, you have an opportunity to say a more wholehearted yes to another.
- **Don't forget.** Keep track of the requests you reject. You should not seek a contribution from someone whose own cause you declined to support.
- **Make an effort.** Not being able to write a check doesn't automatically prevent you from giving in another way: volunteer your time instead.