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### ***The Next Generation of American Giving: A Study on the Multichannel Preferences and Charitable Habits of Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers and Matures***

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# THE NEXT GENERATION OF AMERICAN GIVING

A study on the multichannel preferences and charitable habits of Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers and Matures

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## INTRODUCTION

### Why read this study?

This is not one of those “direct mail is dead” studies, but it is a wake-up call. Not everyone is the same, and there are significant differences between the communication preferences of the four generational groupings assessed in this research.

The art and science of fundraising, as we know it, is undergoing rapid and permanent change driven by technology, the imperative to attract new donors, and by the evolving traits of different generations of supporters.

This paper and the accompanying figures are a contribution to understanding this change and offers some strategic guidance for fundraisers who are struggling to keep up with it.

Change is necessary as the vast majority of fundraising efforts today are optimized for mature donors born prior to 1945, and while most charities have determined how to yield strong results from this segment, year by year this segment is shrinking. A question all charities must answer is how will they attract the next generation of donors, without compromising current revenue from mature donors?

For most charities, the answer has been to continue to apply a traditional direct mail centric acquisition model to target Baby Boomers and other younger donors who make it onto available rental lists. For many, the answer has been to augment their direct mail programs with Internet fundraising efforts which have for the most part operated as a silo. Internet fundraising has grown strongly, but in aggregate major mailers have reported almost a 20 percent decline<sup>1</sup> in new donor acquisition over the last 5 years. “Houston, we’ve got a problem”.

We sought to answer critical questions about how charities should adapt by surveying donors about their behavior and attitudes. In particular, we explored how four generations of Americans give. How much do they give, and are they worthy targets? Via what channels do they prefer to make their donations, receive communications and solicitations? How and from whom do they gather information? What role do family, friends and colleagues play in driving donation decisions?

We explored these questions with 1,526 self-reported donors who participated in an online survey that was in the field between January 20 and 28, 2010, and three focus groups held in December 2009.

Our focus was on the charitable habits of the generational groupings shown in Figure 1, which also illustrates the total population of each generation<sup>2</sup> and the percentage of those that donated at least \$1 to one

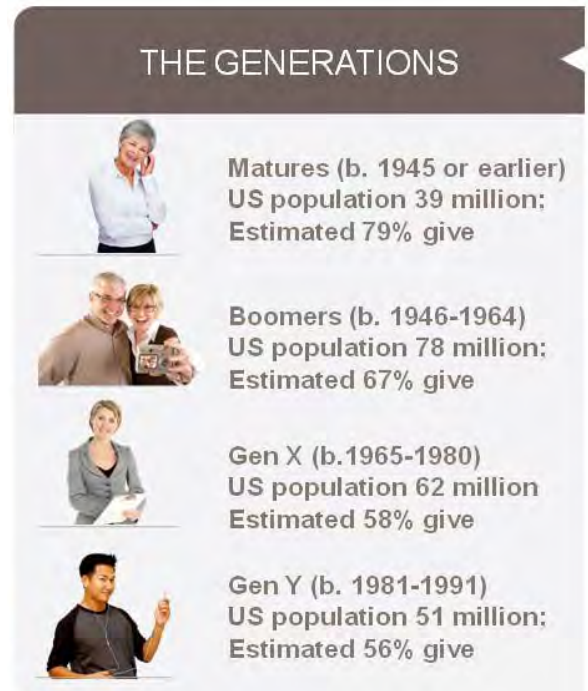


Figure 1: Generational Groups, Total Population and Giving Percentage

<sup>1</sup> Index of National Fundraising Performance | [2009 Third Calendar Quarter Results](#)  
<sup>2</sup> Estimated Population Based on [2008 Census](#)

charitable organization within the last 12 months (excluding school and place of worship).

These findings offer fundraisers insights on acquiring and cultivating the next generation of American donors. Even with this research, there's much we still do not know. For instance, to what extent will Gen Y and Gen X values and priorities shift as they age through more life stages? How will Boomers and Matures use of technology evolve as they continue to grow in their comfort and confidence with it?

Here's what we do know: the game is different, forever.

### A quick tour of the past

Low and middle range donor fundraising arose and evolved as a vehicle for raising funds from the Matures, those born before 1945. Direct mail is by far the primary channel for both soliciting and collecting small gifts. New donors come from rented lists, the members of which receive "prospect packages." And, while typically only one in 100 letters yields a gift, eventually the process pays for itself as those donors give again.



The predominant style and content of direct mail today is oriented toward Matures. It's often in Courier font, the implication being that the letter came straight from someone's typewriter. It's usually a long-form letter as if written from a friend. And, whether Matures have become savvy to the conceits of this approach, they have also grown used to it and remain responsive.

Enter the Boomers. They grew up with the 30-second TV spot; the heyday of what Seth Godin calls the "[TV-Industrial complex](#)." They know when they are being sold, because they grew up being sold. As long as a decade ago, studies were pointing to attitudinal and psychographic differences between Boomers and Matures in their giving practices.

And then the Internet came along initially with Gen X and Gen Y and things got really complicated.

## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Attractiveness of each segment

A key question to answer is what age segments are economically viable to pursue? While the answer probably varies by cause, the following data provides some helpful overall guidance.

In Figure 2, we see that total annual charitable contributions grow with age, but the difference is primarily driven by the number of charities contributed to, rather than differences in gift size. This would suggest that if you are one of those charities successful in attracting younger donors, they can be quite profitable, especially so when you consider their lifetime potential and responsiveness towards lower cost online communications.

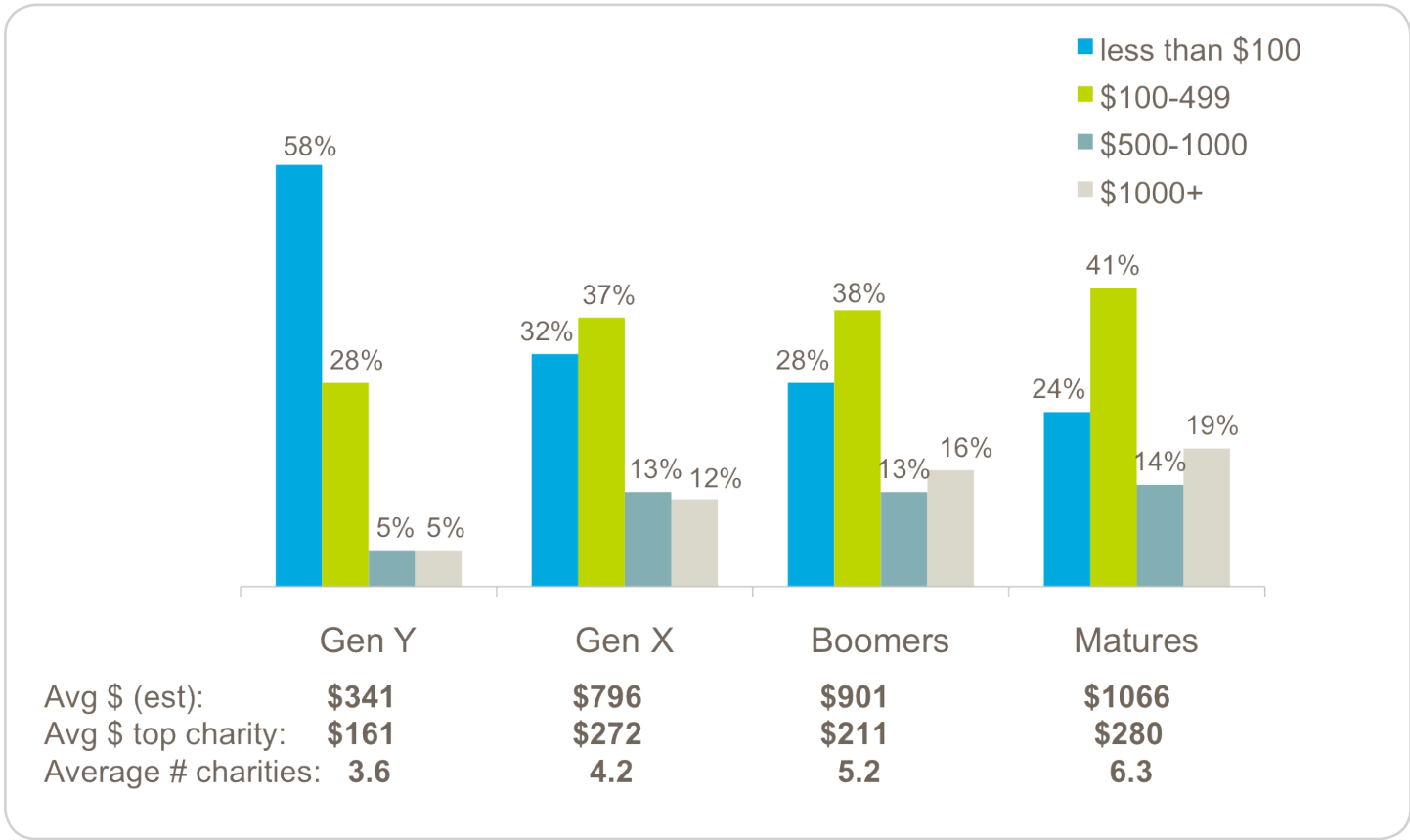


Figure 2: Generational Groups and Average Contributions per Year

Average giving data has to be coupled with the size of the donor population in each generational group to understand the attractiveness of each segment. In Figure 3, we extrapolate the survey results to the general population to estimate the distribution of individual (non major gift) contributions by generation. We see that Boomers, Gen X and Y all represent larger potential donor pools than Matures, substantially so in regards to Boomers and Gen X. Matures represent just 21 percent of the total donor universe, and 28 percent of contributions.

	Estimated Population	Estimated % Giving	Estimated Number of Donors	Average Contributions/Year \$	Estimated Annual Contributions
Matures	39.0M	79%	30.81M	\$1066	\$32.7B
Boomers	78.0M	67%	52.26M	\$901	\$47.1B
Gen X	62.0M	58%	35.96M	\$796	\$28.6B
Gen Y (ages 18-29)	51.0M	56%	28.56M	\$341	\$9.7B
	<b>230.0M</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>147.59M</b>		<b>\$118.2B</b>

Figure 3: Estimated Donors and Contributions by Age Segment

Lastly, per Figure 4, a higher proportion of younger donors plan to increase their charitable contributions to their top charity next year.

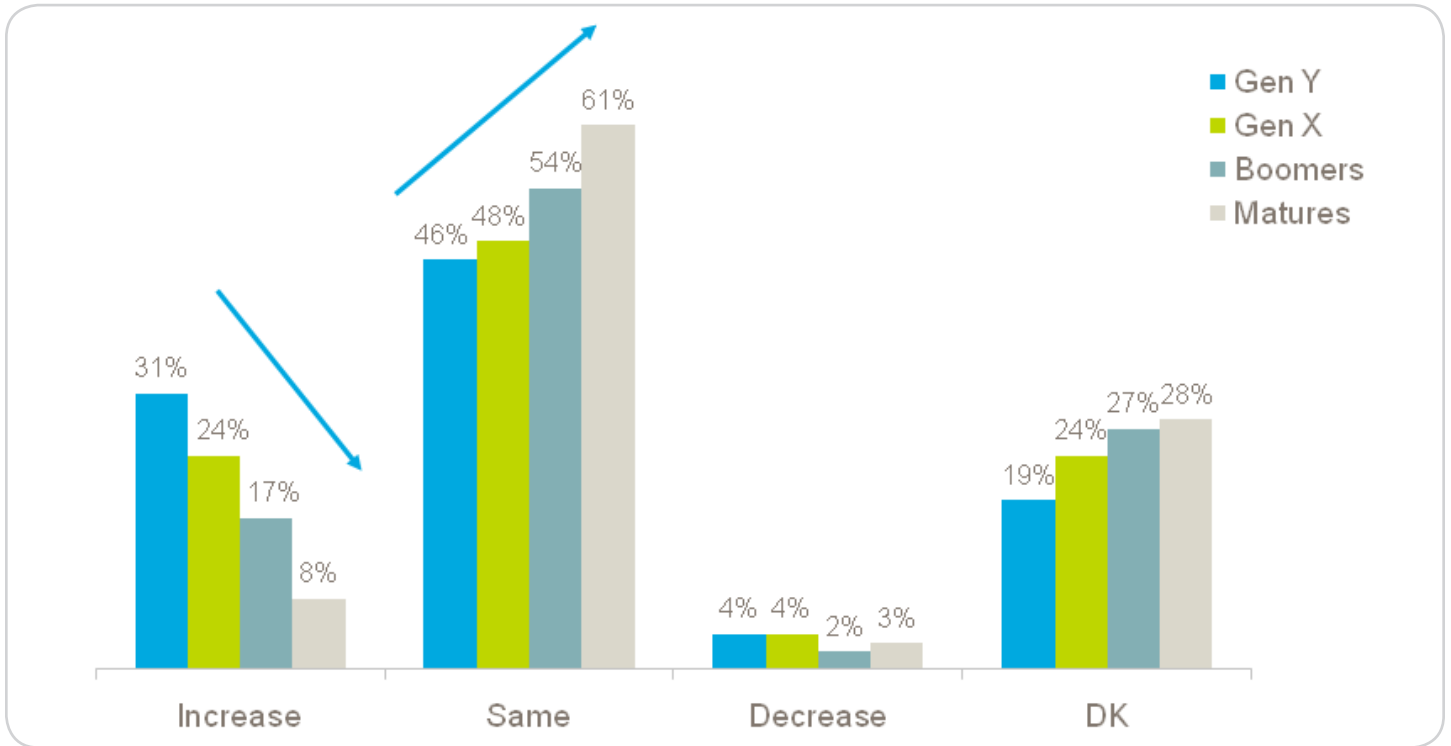


Figure 4: Future Giving Plans by Age Segment

### Channel preferences

Figure 5 illustrates the channels in which donors have given by in the last two years. Giving by checkout means making a contribution when buying your groceries and is common across generations. Giving a check by mail is by far the most common giving method for Matures. Giving by mail is still prevalent with Boomers and Gen X, but at a significantly lower rate than Matures. Not surprisingly, the incidence of having given on a website increases with younger populations to the point that Gen X it is almost equal to mail and for Gen Y it is greater than mail.

Additionally, giving via mobile/text and social networks registered as emerging channels for Gen X and Y donors.

In Figure 6, we see a very similar pattern with information channels. Mail is the dominant charity information channel for Matures, but information sources are far more varied for younger generations, with websites and email communications being ranked as most important. Facebook and other social media register as somewhat significant charity information channels for Gen X and Y.

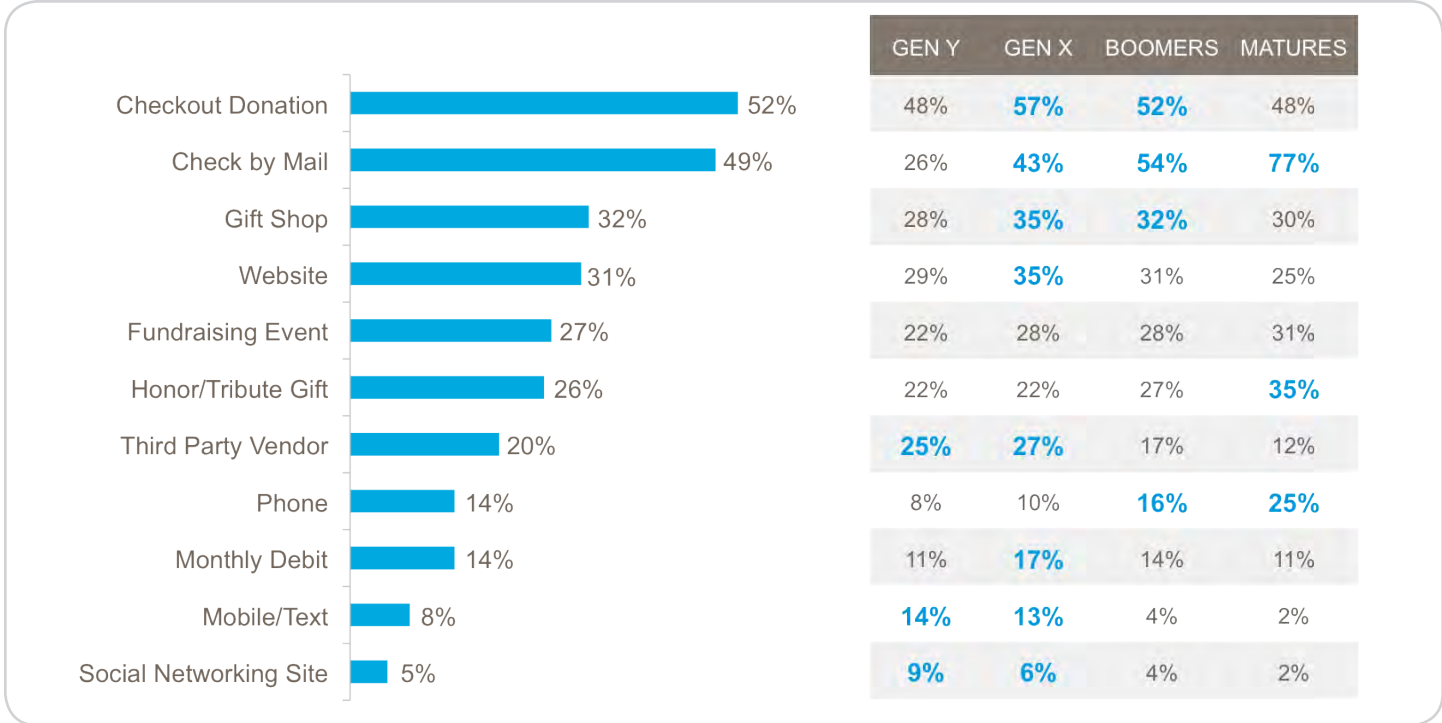


Figure 5: Donation Channels Overall and by Generation  
(blue numbering represents statistically significant difference)

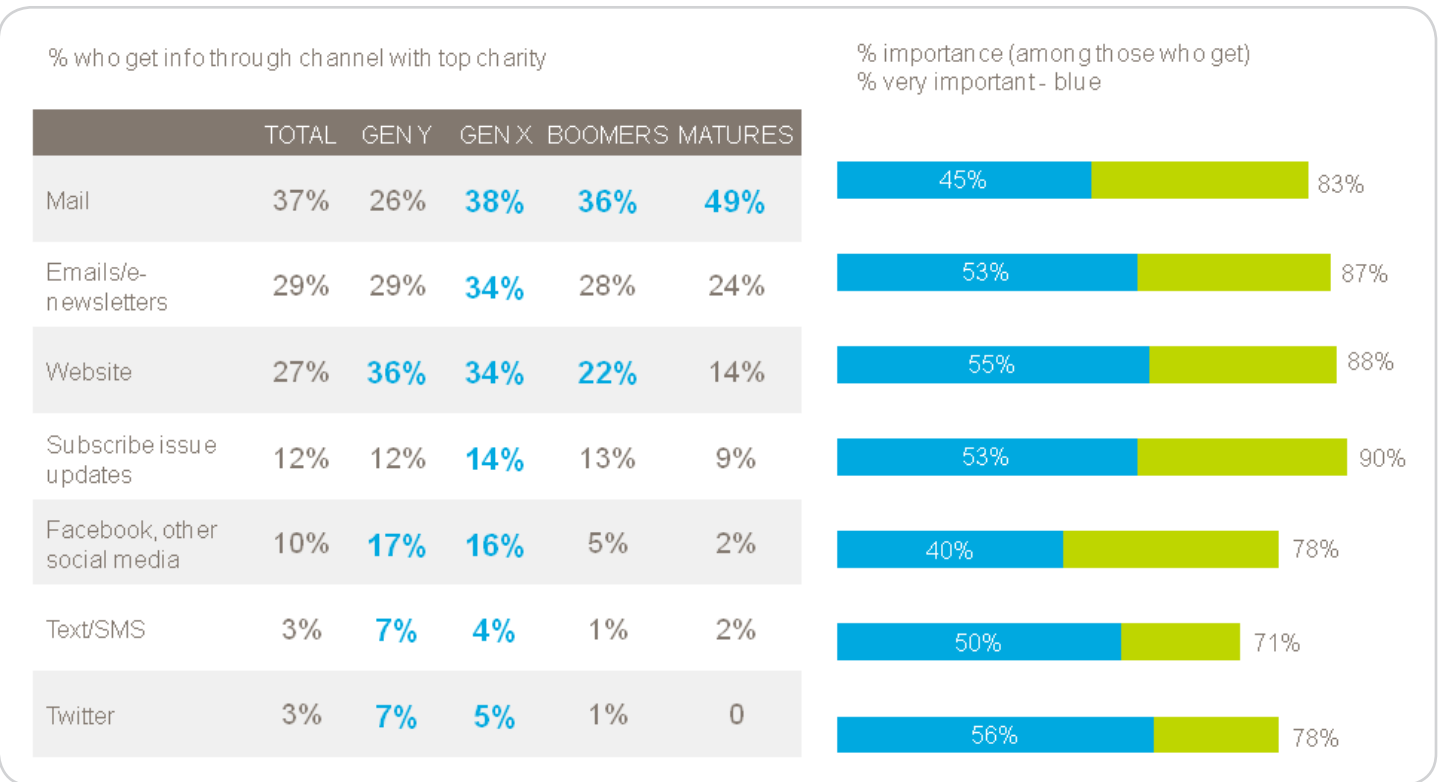
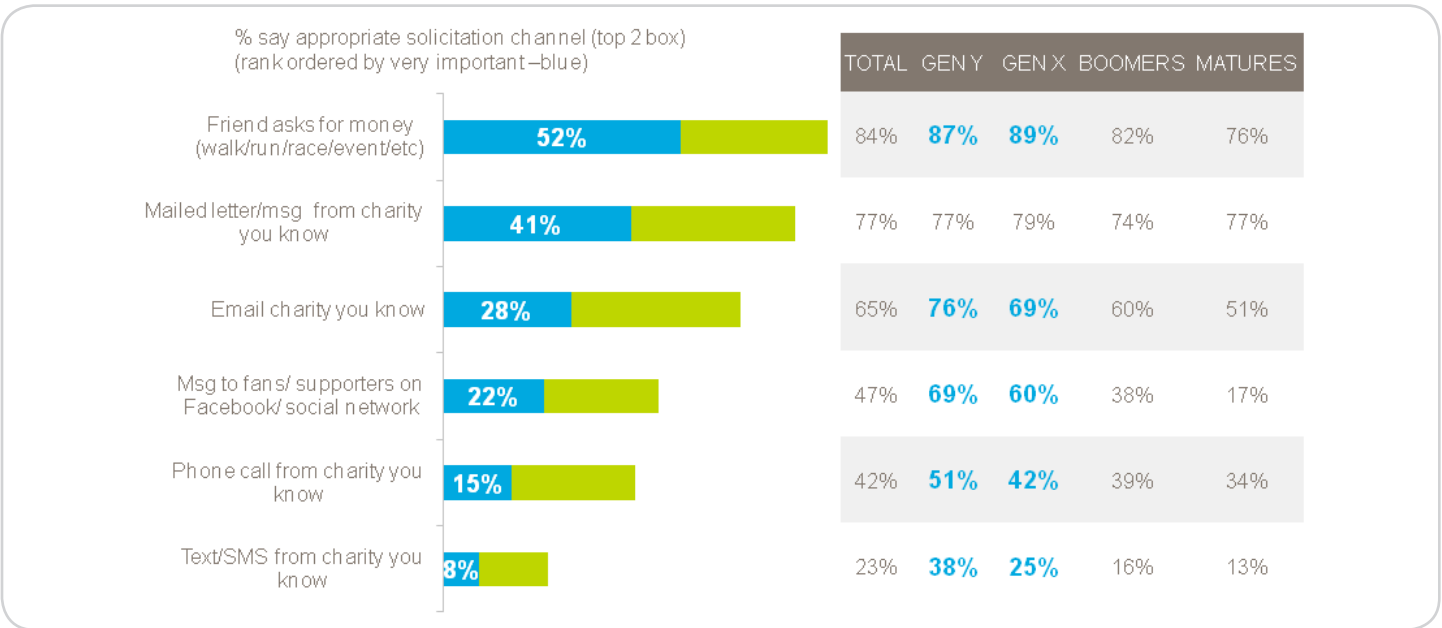


Figure 6: Top Charity Information Channels by Generation  
(blue numbering represents statistically significant difference)

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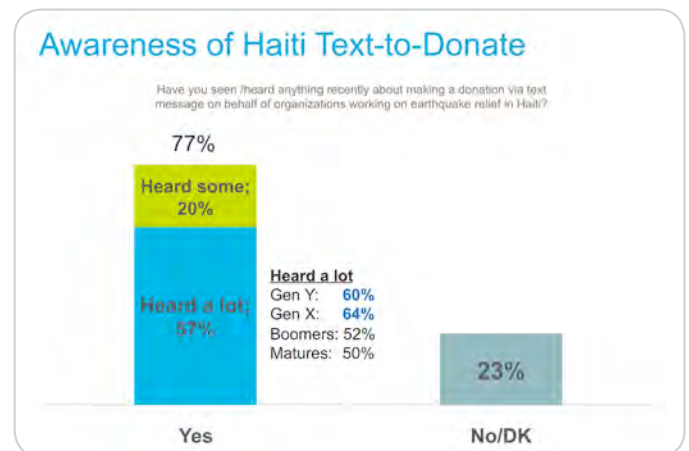
Notably, when considering solicitation channels from charities with whom they had pre-existing relationships, donors said the most appropriate form of solicitation was indirect via a friend as shown in Figure 7. Considering that few charities outside of the health sector really stimulate peer to peer fundraising and provide online tools for it to occur, we consider it a key finding.



**Figure 7: Solicitation Channel Appropriateness Overall and by Generation**  
(blue numbering represents statistically significant difference)

Once again direct mail is the most acceptable solicitation channel for Matures, but also scores surprisingly well with younger generations. It is however, balanced with email for younger generations, indicating the importance of multichannel appeal strategies. Consistent with information channels, Gen X and Y also consider messaging on social networks to be an appropriate form of solicitation, further building the case for multichannel marketing and expanding its scope. We were surprised to see that telemarketing was viewed as more acceptable with younger donors. We hypothesized that perhaps this was because they are less targeted by charity telemarketers, or because they were harder to reach on a publicly listed land line as they more often use cell phones as their primary phone.

In the wake of Haiti, SMS/text messaging is also deemed an appropriate solicitation channel by a good proportion of Gen X and Y donors. While a relatively small proportion of donors (9 percent) reported actually having given via SMS/text message, awareness of it as a giving option is now quite significant. According to Figure 8, 77 percent of donors surveyed responded that they had heard about the option of giving by text message to Haiti relief efforts, and 57 percent stated that they heard a lot.



**Figure 8: Text-to-Donate**  
(blue numbering represents statistically significant difference)



**How do donors first engage?**

Given that the vast majority of donor acquisition spend today is on direct mail, it was important for us to understand how different generations of donors first learned about their top charities and the relative importance of direct mail. Per Figure 9, mail was the prevalent channel for Matures to first learn about their top charity, but was lower down the list for all other generations, behind mainstream media, and for Gen X, word of mouth. It did not register for Gen Y.

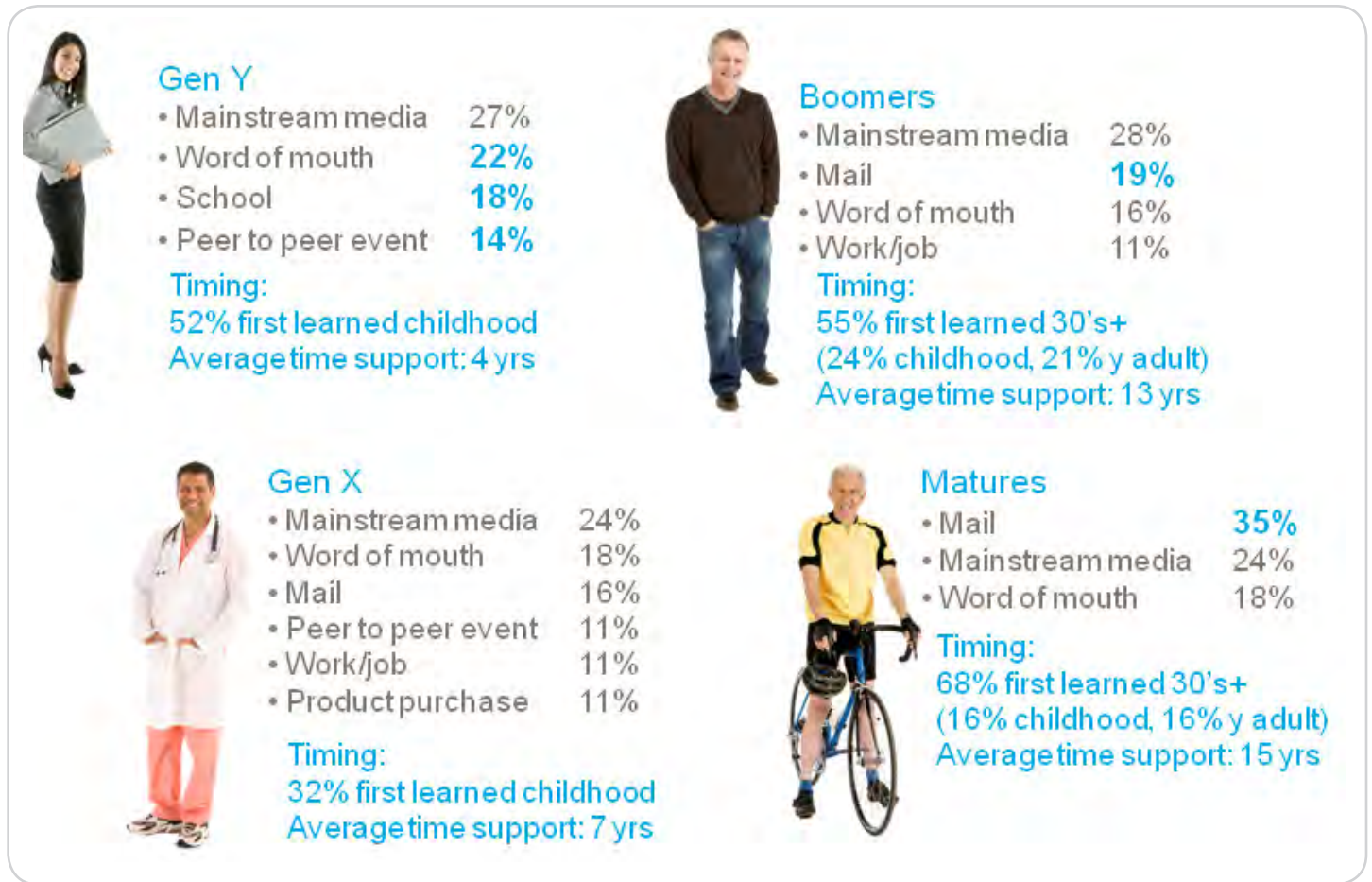


Figure 9: How Donors Learned About Their Top Charity (Top Channel Cited Above)

(blue numbering represents statistically significant difference)

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We also sought to understand how different generations first engaged with their top charity as shown in Figure 10. Giving a direct donation was the primary form of engagement for all generations, but other initial engagement forms including visiting a website and attending an event were more prevalent among younger generations. This suggests that they more often go through one or more cultivation step prior to making their first donation.

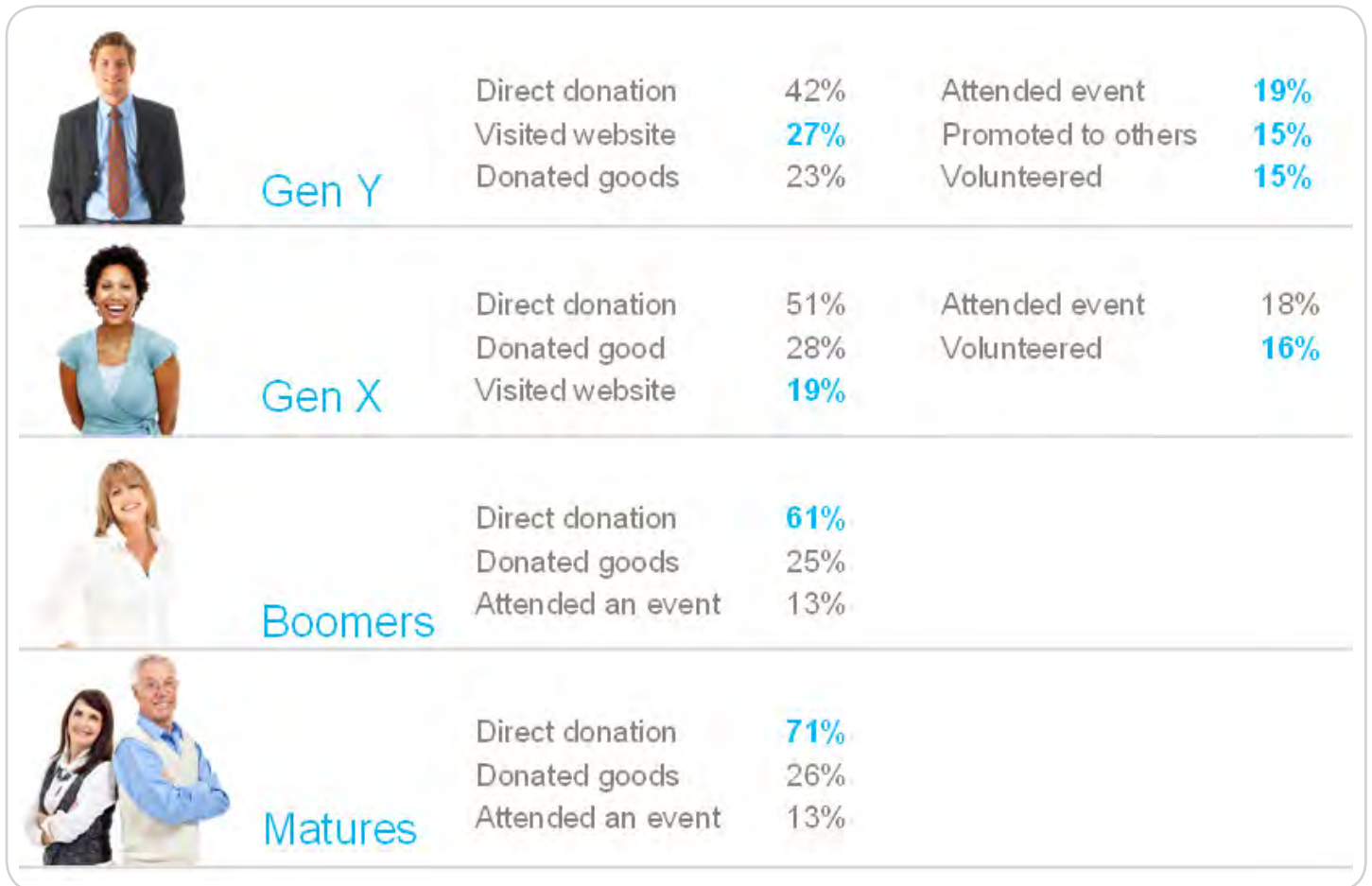
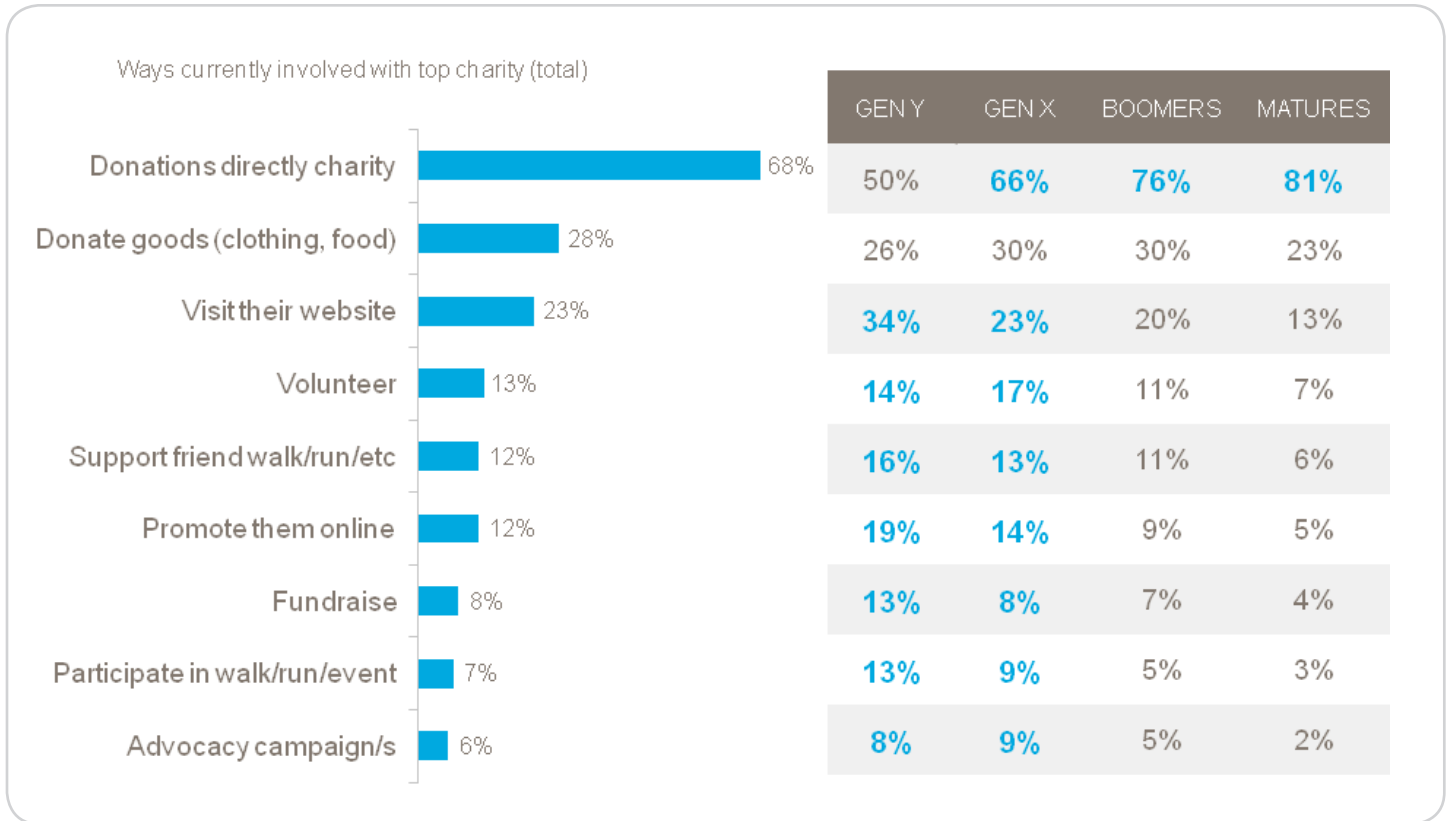


Figure 10: First Form of Engagement with Top Charity  
(blue numbering represents statistically significant difference)

**How donors want to engage?**

As Figure 11 depicts, giving money is the primary way donors engage with their top charity across generations, but younger generations are more likely to show their support in other ways. When asked how you can make the most difference with your top charity, giving money was a smaller piece of the equation for Gen Y and X donors, offset mostly by spreading the word, fundraising for the charity and volunteering.



**Figure 11: First Form of Engagement**  
 (blue numbering represents statistically significant difference)

In the survey, we asked donors to tell us how well various attitudes and values about philanthropy described them today. Younger donors described themselves as much more random and peer motivated in their giving, in contrast to older donors who described themselves as more premeditated. Specifically, younger donors are more likely to support a charity when friends/family ask versus the charity asking them. They consider much of their giving relatively random based upon their emotional reaction to something in the media, or based upon who asks. Older donors have a well established commitment to their primary charities. They have a budget set aside for charitable giving, and know the organizations they plan to give to. This suggests that it is harder for a new charity to break in with older donors, but once you secure them, they are quite committed. Younger donors represent relatively open targets. The best way to reach them is either through inspirational stories in the media or better still, via their friends. Given that a vast majority of charitable marketing efforts today are directed towards direct donor engagement and solicitation versus stimulating peer to peer engagement and general media exposure, it would suggest that those marketing efforts are poorly aligned with what younger donors say motivates them to give.

## OUR INTERPRETATION

### 1. Fundraising is profoundly multichannel.

While direct mail dominates giving by Matures, the percentage of Boomers, X's and Y's who respond to postal mail declines steeply with each successive generation. The other generations report a variety of channels such as ecommerce, online giving, event fundraising, tributes, monthly debit programs and even mobile/text donations as important giving methods. The younger the donor, the greater the number of ways they give. But, what does this mean?

- That the heavy bias towards direct mail as a donor acquisition channel no longer makes sense.
- That the solicitation channel and the transaction channel may be different (for instance a donor may get a direct mail piece and choose to give online).
- That donors who are acquired via one channel (e.g. the Internet) may prefer to continue giving via another (e.g. direct mail).
- That websites are often consulted before checks are written.
- That a donor might learn of a cause, or be motivated to support a cause, based on something a friend posts on their Facebook wall, but then write a check or donate online. In the study, 50 percent of Matures report using Facebook!

Focus groups with Gen X and Y underscored an inclination, especially among younger donors, to “channel hop” depending on the context and the moment. They might make a mobile phone gift via short code in an emergency to Cause A, write a check at an event to Cause B, and respond to a telemarketer seeking to upgrade them to monthly giving to Cause C.

### 2. Causation may be impossible to track.

It was so much easier before the Internet came along and wrecked everything. For the most part, if the check came back in the mail with the order card from the blue closed-face number 10 envelope, then you could safely infer that it was the contents of that package that induced the gift.

No longer. Calculating ROI is going to be much harder going forward and is going to require a new, and not yet defined, calculus.

Perhaps we should focus less on attribution/causation and more on the relative role and influence of each channel. Then, in time we will be able to determine which segment of our audience responds best to each treatment strategy.

### 3. The donor database of the future must track all channels and interactions.

Most donor databases are built either for major donor fundraising (an entirely different conversation) or for direct mail. In either case they fail miserably at tracking and accounting for multichannel behavior, or helping design and manage multichannel campaigns. Furthermore, they rarely track participation across the organization outside of donating and attending events. The next generation of donors is not just giving through multiple channels; they volunteer, advocate, participate in and, for some organizations receive services, as well as champion the cause to others. Traditional donor database systems based on the old model of financial transactions do not provide the relationship insight the next generation donor needs and expects. The ROI conversation cannot even begin until this need is effectively addressed by a new generation of integrated marketing database products.

### 4. Message/channel integration is a more urgent priority than ever.

Some of the most fundamental problems fundraisers face are more organizational than technological. In most organizations, direct mail and online fundraising are managed in separate departments, each with its own goals, some of which may be in competition with each other. Occasionally, they report up to the same leader, but even in those cases, rarely are processes and people very aligned. In some organizations, even the Internet pie has been divvied up and doled out to various departments for political rather than strategic reasons. It's not unusual for control of the website, social marketing outreach, and email communications to each live in separate silos within a large nonprofit. While these outcomes may have reduced internal strife, this approach is fatal to effective multichannel marketing.

### 5. Direct mail has a bright future — but it needs to evolve. So does telemarketing.

Direct mail is alive and well and has an important fundraising future. In fact, the research suggests that younger donors might be more open to direct mail solicitations than Boomers. What is different is the centrality of direct mail to the marketing mix. And probably what needs also to be different is the content and style of the packages themselves. We also need to understand if the openness to direct mail is preferred or simply accepted since it is the primary way many organizations currently solicit.

In the old model, direct mail was the sun around which all of the other tactics revolved. For the foreseeable future, there is unlikely to be any single channel that plays such a dominant role, though we expect the web/email and direct mail to be the primary channels, augmented by new media channels such as social media and mobile, as well as telemarketing.

### 6. Word of mouth is critical.

In a world in which we are all drowning in information, one shortcut to which we all resort is the advice of trusted friends and colleagues. The study bears out the importance of friend-to-friend communications as a core element of an effective fundraising strategy. This method is also known as peer-to-peer or word of mouth, and according to the study, 52 percent of all donors ranked “friends asking for money” as a very appropriate channel to receive a charitable solicitation, out-pacing mail (41 percent) and email from charity (28 percent say very appropriate).

This may take the form of “thon” type events where individuals set up personal fundraising pages, but that's only one aspect of word of mouth. In all likelihood, your donors and promoters — and not you — will pick the channel they use to spread the word. Your first job will continue to be giving people something to talk about. We do believe providing the tools to make it easy for supporters to promote you and raise money for you will lead to superior results. These include peer to peer fundraising tools, personal events scheduling/management tools, and integration to social media platforms that make it easy for supporters to spread the word.

In this regard, it's important to be tracking the willingness of your community to serve as spokespersons and pitchpersons for your cause. The [Net Promoter Score](#) is one of a number of metrics that will be useful, in tandem with understanding what brand attributes, benefits, messages, and tactics drive promotion.

### 7. The role of social networks in fundraising is important, and still evolving.

At a minimum, social networks are a critically important word of mouth engine and starting to play a far more prominent role for donors of all ages. In fact, half the Matures we surveyed are on Facebook (though this result is undoubtedly skewed by our survey approach – an online survey). Nearly 30 percent of Boomers surveyed use it regularly.

And the psychic benefit that donors, particularly Gen Y and X, get from promoting the causes they care about to their network, help you build a relationship with them where they feel as if they make a difference.

Where the debate over social networks gets muddy is their role as transaction devices. Will people at the end of the day choose to give via a Facebook app, Facebook Causes or TwitPay rather than go to a nonprofit's website? The data suggests not yet, but possibly soon. But that is only a small part of the value of these digital water coolers, whose brand building and viral message distribution value is now beyond debate.

### 8. It's not too early to be courting Gen Ys, but the really significant value lies with Gen X and Boomers.

Although Gen X and Boomers show a greater propensity for larger donations as shown in Figure 2, Gen Y's are nothing to sneeze at. According to our study, Gen Y is already giving and their commitment to philanthropy will grow with time. According to the survey participants, Gen Y's donate to fewer causes, but give approximately \$341 total to the causes they do support, and approximately \$161 to their top charity. If your organization has a "cradle-to-grave" fundraising strategy, meaning you acquire donors at a young age and steward them through their lifetime, it's time to be talking to Gen Y now.

### 9. Mobile's time is coming, whatever *that* is.

In 1999, Internet fundraising went through a critical growth phase as donations for the crisis in Kosovo and then Hurricane Mitch spurred a massive increase in online giving. In 2001, in the wake of 9/11, online giving reached the hundreds of millions. In 2004, Howard Dean made history with his largely web funded presidential bid. By 2005, the question of the value of the Internet in philanthropy was settled.

A decade later, mobile giving is on a similar rising path, with Haiti possibly mirroring Kosovo and Mitch. Seventy-seven percent of respondents to the survey had heard something about mobile giving options for Haiti relief (Figure 8). Nine percent actually donated and another 22 percent say they considered it (Figure 9).

But what is mobile giving, and what will it be? For the tens of millions of iPhone, Blackberry and Droid users, it's almost as easy to give via an app or via direct access to the web as it is to make a small gift via a short SMS code. So while there is a big and bright future for giving via the device that is always at our side, just what form that giving will take is anyone's guess.

### 10. None of this is as important as the content you produce.

There is not a single tactic or giving channel that is nearly as important as the quality of your message and your ability to inspire, arouse and engage the hearts and minds of your donors. Especially their hearts.

We're at an interesting juncture — there is overwhelming evidence, most recently from the behavioral economics community— that charitable giving is a deeply emotional process. Yet recent analyses of fundraising appeals suggest that we still have a

pronounced tendency to neglect the heart and over-appeal to the head.

The most clever and savvy multichannel effort will fall flat if your audience is not moved or inspired by what you are saying. Conversely, if you can capture the hearts and imaginations of your audience, the communications channels will take care of themselves to a great degree.

## ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TOMORROW

1. Reallocate some of your direct mail acquisition spend towards the web and social media. Potential online acquisition strategies fall into four main categories:
  - Paid lead sourcing via channels like Care2, Change.org, online advertising e.g. on Facebook, and paying for search terms on primary search engines;
  - Providing small back-end premiums to incent conversion on your website — just remember, new premium donors are less likely to continue giving without the offer of more premiums;
  - Offering capabilities or services on your site that encourage conversion and/or sharing, for example e-cards;
  - Running viral campaigns asking current supporters to forward a message on to others.
2. Collect contact information for multiple channels. Collect physical mail addresses as far as possible for online acquired prospects so that you can also send them mail. Collect email addresses for Facebook fans and direct mail donors.
3. Set shared goals for your online and direct mail fundraising teams, so that they seek ways to integrate to realize stronger cross-channel performance versus sometimes acting in competition with each other.
4. Build (and regularly review) an integrated campaign calendar that encompasses communications and solicitations across channels.
5. Collect age data from your constituents by survey or perform an age overlay to understand the age composition of your file and how it's evolving.
6. Test differentiated treatment strategies for younger donors and prospects. Such treatments could consist of a heavier emphasis on online communications versus mail, and a greater emphasis on engaging for participation and spreading the word versus solely contributing money.
7. Ensure that you have robust capabilities in place for creating and managing relationships via your website, email and social media channels. If you have the resources, begin to experiment with mobile.
8. Choose a CRM/donor management system that helps you to track and manage relationships with next generation donors across channels, and across activities including advocacy and volunteering.
9. Work with agencies that not only advocate but understand how to practice multichannel marketing.

## CONCLUSION

It's a lot harder to be a fundraiser than it was even a few years ago. The pace of change is accelerating, each new generation of donors brings a new set of habits and demands, and the rulebook by which we were all trained is hopelessly out of date.

On the other hand, the need for the services your cause provides, the policies you promote, and the values you champion have never been more urgently important. And there is the satisfaction of being part of the generation of fundraisers that gets to build something entirely new – a modern and enduring approach to connecting people who care with the causes that matter in our lives.

The silver lining is that new media channels and new strategies like peer to peer offer the promise of a lower fundraising cost structure and access to a much broader donor pool than current fundraising techniques.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

Commissioned by Convio, Edge Research conducted the study in two phases and surveyed 1,526 donors to nonprofit organizations in the past 12 months. In December of 2009, three focus groups were held to write/refine the survey instrument, and provide qualitative understanding of the survey findings. In January of 2010, the second phase of the study began with an online survey of 1,526 donors. The survey data are weighted to actual generational distribution among the donor population. Margin of error for sample as whole: +/-2.5% at the 95% confidence level. Margin of error for generation subgroups is +/- 5% at the 95% confidence level. Sea Change Strategies provided technical support, analysis and editing support for the final study.

## CONTRIBUTORS

### About Convio

Convio is the leading provider of on-demand constituent engagement solutions that enable nonprofit organizations, or NPO's, to more effectively raise funds, advocate for change and cultivate relationships with donors, activists, volunteers, alumni and other constituents. For more information, please visit [www.convio.com](http://www.convio.com)

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**Convio** is the leading provider of on-demand constituent engagement solutions that enable nonprofit organizations, or NPO's, to more effectively raise funds, advocate for change and cultivate relationships with donors, activists, volunteers, alumni and other constituents. For more information, please visit [www.convio.com](http://www.convio.com)

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