

# **Bragging Can Polish a Donor's Image — or Not**

*By Alex Daniels*

When people tell their friends on Facebook that they made a charitable gift, nonprofits can get a lot of free publicity that may boost donations. But do people who see those posts think their friends are just trying to impress others with their generosity rather than touting a great cause?

Researchers from the London Business School and the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School recently examined that question, which they call "the braggart's dilemma."

"People don't want to appear like they're bragging," says Jonathan Berman of the London Business School, a co-author of the study. "But if you don't brag, nobody has any idea you've done a good deed at all." And as charities increasingly try to get donors to enlist friends and relatives to give, especially using social media, could this approach backfire if it seems as though donors are trying too hard to have their good deeds recognized?

## **The Test**

In a series of six online tests, researchers presented people with a variety of scenarios to test reactions to bragging. For instance, in one test, people were asked to imagine walking with a friend named Jeff who stops to give \$20 to a local food bank. In another scenario, participants first learn of Jeff's donation when he posts a message about it in Facebook. In a third scenario, participants imagine seeing Jeff give the \$20 in person, and they also see Jeff's Facebook post about his donation later that night

## **Results**

When people didn't know whether Jeff had made the gift until reading his post on Facebook, his bragging seemed altruistic. Participants were similarly impressed when they saw Jeff give \$20 in person and then say nothing about it on Facebook. However, participants who imagined seeing Jeff give the \$20 in person as well as seeing his follow-up post on Facebook viewed his actions less positively than in the other scenarios, perhaps because it seemed like he was going overboard in his bragging. The researchers also discovered that when people brag about making a gift, perceptions differ depending on who they are: A social worker who writes about her donation, for instance, would not be perceived as altruistic as an investment banker who does the same, because people are more likely to expect generosity from a social worker.

## **Digging Deeper**

The researchers did not examine whether bragging might put a charity in a negative light. "That's the million-dollar question," says Mr. Berman. But the study offered some clues about how to brag in a way that doesn't prompt suspicion about a donor's motives. For instance, people tended to think donors' hearts were in the right place when they included in their Facebook posts a message recruiting other people to join them in giving.

## **FIND IT**

The article "[The Braggart's Dilemma: on the Social Rewards and Penalties of Advertising Prosocial Behavior](#)" was published in the February issue of the *Journal of Marketing Research*.