

Selling Spontaneous Charitable Services*

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Abstract

A fundamental human need is to help others. Many individuals do not recognize the need, and others do not seek to satisfy the need. Although charitable organizations, including churches, present numerous opportunities to give money or to physically work at specific events, they fail to present opportunities in the marketplace where individuals can physically contribute spontaneously and for limited duration. We present one example suitable for a street fair: repackaging bulk foods into smaller amounts distributable to individuals and families by charitable hungry-relief agencies. The author solicits theoretical and real-world examples suitable for shopping malls, night scenes, and even resorts.

1 Existing Charitable Activities

Charitable organizations invert the typical marketplace model where consumers seek items to satisfy their needs or wants. In the typical model, a consumer obtains physical goods, services, or money made available by a seller in exchange for money or sometimes physical goods or services. (See Table 1.) For example, a consumer may pay money to obtain the physical good of a loaf of bread. All combinations of exchange exist. For example, a consumer may pay money, e.g., U.S. dollars, to obtain money, e.g., U.K.

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consumer	seller		
	physical good	service	money
physical good	barter sugar for flour	barter maize for accounting services	sell used automobile for A\$
service	work in flour factory and paid in flour	gardening in exchange for housing	work as lawyer and be paid in US\$
money	pay US\$ for mobile phone	pay € for 500 SMS messages	exchange US\$ for UK£

Table 1: In the marketplace, consumers and sellers can both exchange physical goods, services, or money.

consumer	charitable organization
physical good	donate used car to public radio
service	provide labor to build houses with Habitat for Humanity
money	give money for leukemia research

Table 2: Charities accept physical goods, services, and money.

pounds, or a consumer may pay a service in exchange for money, e.g., employment’s leading to a paycheck. Admittedly, money, by the reason for its existence, is most frequently used.

Charitable organizations sell consumers the opportunity to satisfy their needs or wants to give, not receive. Existing organizations permit consumers to give physical goods, services, and money. (See Table 2.) Typically, these are planned transactions usually in physical locations separate from non-charitable organizations. For example, a volunteer may donate a day of labor building a house at a Habitat for Humanity site. The volunteer prepares, wears the proper clothes, registers in advance, and travels to a specific site dedicated to Habitat. In another example, a donor may deliver gently used clothing to a battered women’s shelter. This is typically planned, but perhaps not scheduled, because the donor must gather the clothing and deliver it to a specific site.

Donating money is the charitable activity that can be most spontaneous and occur in the ordinary marketplace. In the States, charities will send unsolicited mail in December hoping for spontaneous, end-of-the-tax-year do-

nations. The Salvation Army sends donation collectors into the marketplace during the Christmas shopping season hoping for spontaneous donations. The Lance Armstrong Foundation has done a superior job of selling donation opportunities through its plastic Livestrong wristbands, which reward the donor and also advertise the donation opportunity to others.

Spontaneous charitable donation of physical goods in the marketplace on a continuing, organized basis seems difficult because few Westerners carry physical goods to donate. The closest example the author knows is canned food collection bins in food stores. Of course, beggars in the marketplace have solicited spontaneous donations of physical goods for millennia.

2 Spontaneous Charitable Activities

Providing opportunities for spontaneous contributions of services by people in the marketplace is an unfilled opportunity. Consider a street fair, which typically has tens of booths selling food and items to visitors for money. People attend and spend money to fill their needs and wants. A charity could easily sponsor a booth to collect spontaneous donations, but it could also provide the opportunity for street fair visitors to spontaneously donate services and satisfy their need to help others. A food bank could provide the opportunity for visitors to repackage 50kg bags of rice and beans, donated elsewhere, into 1kg bags suitable for distribution. Visitors could participate for thirty seconds or hours. This example illustrates several principles and best practices for spontaneous contributions of services in the marketplace.

2.1 Requirements

The opportunity should require no advanced preparation by participants. Since participants spontaneously participate, they cannot be expected to bring tools, appropriate clothing, or even paperwork. Rebagging rice requires no materials except perhaps aprons and gloves which can be provided to participants. Requiring permission slips, construction clothing, or Bibles is a barrier to participation although participants could be expected to bring mobile phones, which are commonly carried.

The opportunity should be accessible by as wide a variety of participants as possible. For example, anyone aged three years or older,

regardless of education, can rebag rice. If presenting an opportunity at a tax accountant convention, it is reasonable to expect participants to have knowledge of tax law, but this is unreasonable in most other circumstances.

It should be possible to participate for a very short period of time. For example, one can fill two or three bags of rice in less than one minute, including time to get started. Because these opportunities should be spontaneous, requiring a longer minimum period of time discourages participation. Imagine how few potential participants will participate if thirty minutes is required.

Participants should be able to immediately understand the activity, its duration, and its benefit. Potential participants will change their behavior and spontaneously become actual participants only if they understand the activity. For example, the activity of rebagging rice is immediately visually understandable by all comers, but the benefit of feeding hungry people should be explained visually or verbally. In another example of recording a video message of support to 2011 Japan tsunami victims, the activity itself is probably sporadic enough that it needs visual advertisement augmenting displaying the activity.

2.2 Best Practices

Best practices for spontaneous contributions of service in the marketplace including the following.

Choose a location and time with high visibility and a lot of potential traffic. Only a small fraction of people who see the opportunity will participate; the more people who see it, the more participants. Paying less for an inferior location or time is a waste of money. In a street fair, choose a central location, a location near the entrance, or a location near food stands. For activities reached by driving, choose a site next to the most popular stores on the best side of the best intersection. If participants arrive by public transport, choose a location adjacent to a transit hub. If aiming at tourists in New York City, choose a site next to the Empire State Building. One might think that such a location is prohibitively expensive, but a landlord may lease an empty location to a charity for a short period of time

and a minimal price. Or one could use a recreational vehicle or food truck to avoid paying for land.

Choose an activity suitable for the marketplace's demographics.

If the marketplace is nightclubs appealing to unmarried young adults dressed in nice attire, choose an activity helping other young people, not one helping senior citizens.

Providing the opportunity to donate is optional. A single goal of encouraging spontaneous contributions of services or physical goods or money should dominate. This focuses the organizers on one task, maximizing the probability of success. That said, the opportunity to donate money to pay for the service event's expenses *might* complement the service. Some participants will be so moved by the opportunity to be of service that they will also donate. It is the author's belief that serving establishes a stronger relationship than just donating money.

Providing future opportunities is desirable. A participant, whether serving thirty seconds or several hours, may desire other opportunities to service. Providing written information or URLs about future spontaneous or non-spontaneous opportunities to serve can attract future volunteers.