Do Donor Emotions Impact Donor Behavior? 
Exploring the effects of donor emotions toward giving appeals 
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**Project Summary**
A Colorado Springs-based nonprofit was interested in the effects of donor aggravation, resulting from multiple financial appeals, on donating to the organization. This study examined donor surveys and donor transactional data to compare the behaviors of donors reporting positive, negative, or neutral emotional responses to appeals to give. Statistically significant results indicate that aggravated donors may exhibit more negative outcomes; however, small PRE (Proportional Reduction of Error) values indicate that further study is needed.

**Organizational Context**
The organization has requested to remain anonymous. They are a large, international nonprofit with primarily Christian Donors. The goals of this work are to help the organization understand the impact of their donor’s emotions and to make evidence-based decisions regarding giving appeals strategy.

**Background**
- Numerous scholarly works support a link between donor engagement and overall donor satisfaction and commitment to the nonprofit (Naskrent & Siebelt, 2011).
- Emotional rewards from giving (a “warm glow” feeling) are an important motivator to give (Andreoni, 1989).
- Paul Ekman (2011) found there to be 7 universal emotions – anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, contempt, & happiness. This theory informs the survey the organization used.

**Methods**
This study was a cross sectional, secondary data analysis, that included 18,697 donors (“other” n = 15,932, “aggravated/angry” n = 2,765) Eight separate surveys (conducted by the nonprofit) asked donors their emotional response immediately following 8 specific appeals to give over a 6-month period Donors selected an emotion (and accompanying facial expression) that best represented their feelings: neutral, happy, surprised, sad, worried, aggravated, or angry Compared respondents who selected “aggravated” or “angry” to those who selected any other emotion using a database of transactional behaviors including (1) total giving and total non-recurring giving, (2) donor engagement level, (3) recurring giving cancellations, and (4) unsubscribes from email communication with the organization.

**Findings**

(1) Total giving and total non-recurring giving:
- Aggravated/angry donors gave, on average, slightly less per person than other donors - about $36/year less in total giving and about $11/year less in non-recurring giving.

(2) Donor engagement level:
- Generally, donors in the “aggravated/angry” group had comparatively lower engagement scores than those in the “other” group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Donor Engagement across Emotional Response</th>
<th>PRE: 0%, 0%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Med</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Donor engagement across emotional response groups

- “Aggravated/Angry”
- “Other”

The organization tracks an engagement score for each donor. The engagement levels are the evenly divided top, middle, and bottom thirds of that score. The sample proportions demonstrate a heavy bias towards higher engagement.

(3) Recurring giving cancellations:
- In this sample, “aggravated/angry” donors canceled their recurring giving commitments slightly more frequently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of group who cancelled</th>
<th>“Other” (1.54%)</th>
<th>“Aggravated/angry” (2.13%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE: 1.7%</td>
<td>P = 0.022</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

(4) Unsubscribes from email with the organization:
- “Aggravated/angry” donors unsubscribed from email communication with the nonprofit almost twice as often.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of group who unsubscribed</th>
<th>“Other” (8.64%)</th>
<th>“Aggravated/angry” (14%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE: 6.5%</td>
<td>P = 0.00</td>
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</table>

**Findings (cont.)**

Interpreting the Findings:
The difference between groups: “Aggravated/angry” donors appear to have slightly more negative outcomes – the differences are small, but meaningful in the context of a very large organization.
The p values: Each outcome measure showed statistical significance.
The PRE values: PREs quantify the extent that knowledge about one variable can help predict another. By knowing the independent variable (donor emotion), we reduce our error in predicting the outcome by the PRE value. In this study, the PREs tell us that the IV accounted for very little variation in the dependent variables.

**Potential Limitations**
Sampling bias – donors in study are more highly engaged than average, potential for statistical suppression
Data maturity – only a few months of records for some participants
Different giving appeals may provoke different emotions or outcomes
Assumption that donor emotion is relatively stable

**Takeaways & Recommendations**
Low PRE values prescribe caution in accepting the differences between the aggravated/angry donors and donors who reported other emotions.
To improve future evaluations, the organization can consider:
- Repeat the study using a sample stratified by engagement level
- Conduct a multivariate study accounting for known correlates of giving
- Tracking the number and design of giving appeals donors receive at an individual level
- Sending the survey to the same donors multiple times in a year
- Attempt to replicate findings
- Test alternative emotion metrics

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**References**
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