



Match Charity Messages to Donor Mindsets: Abstract versus Concrete Appeals

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Fundraisers often default to concrete, identifiable impact stories. However, theory suggests that abstraction can broaden moral concern. Drawing on insights from moral psychology and construal-level theory, this article demonstrates that the most effective approach depends on the moral values of the donor.

In which situations does abstract framing increase giving, and how are these situations moderated by loyalty values?

Across three experiments and one survey, the authors found that abstraction increases prosociality among low-loyalty (impartiality-oriented) donors. In two of the four studies, concreteness facilitated prosociality among donors who highly value loyalty. Rather than a simple “abstract vs. concrete” rule, the findings point to an interaction between message framing and donor value orientation. Practical implication: segment and test message–segment interactions.

[#fundraising](#) [#donorsegmentation](#) [#messageframing](#) [#construallevel](#) [#moralvalues](#)

Background

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Context



- Two opposing traditions in fundraising theory clash: **the identifiable-victim effect favours concrete appeals, while construal-level theory predicts that abstract appeals can broaden moral concern.** Where the former highlights the persuasive power of vivid, individualised stories, the latter suggests that higher-level, principle-based framing activates universalistic concerns.
- The authors propose a **moral values moderator: low loyalty aligns with impartiality ('greater good'), whereas high loyalty aligns with partiality and personal connection.** In other words, the effectiveness of a message depends on whether donors prioritise universal moral principles or group-based bonds and obligations.
- The evidence base comprises **three experiments and one cross-sectional survey.** Abstraction and concreteness were operationalised in multiple ways, including donations, to measure prosociality.
- Abstraction showed a **robust positive effect on prosociality when loyalty was valued lowly.** For high-loyalty donors, results for concreteness were heterogeneous: concreteness increased prosociality in two of the four studies.

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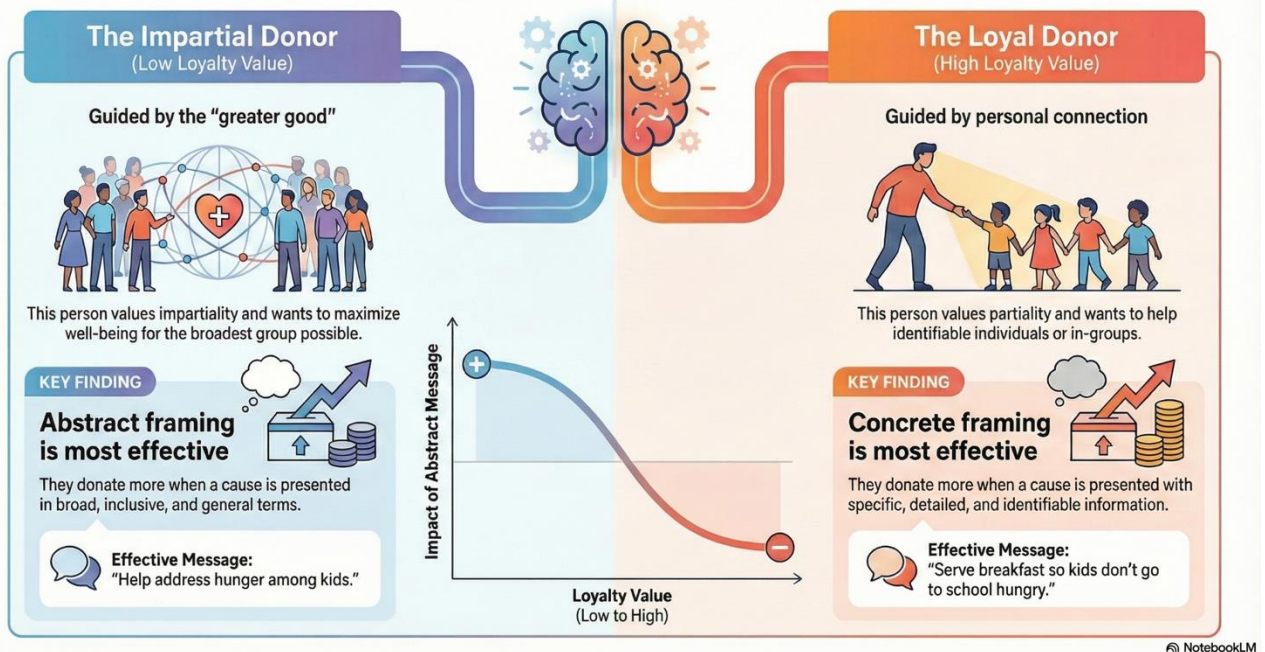
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Take aways & Learnings



- **Tailor framing to donor mindsets rather than relying on average effects:** use segmentation to identify universals and tailor abstract (mission-level) vs. concrete (identifiable impact) framing.
- **Test interactions as well as main effects:** run A/B designs as frame × segment experiments to avoid misleading 'global best practice' conclusions. This means explicitly analysing whether **different donor groups respond differently to the same appeal, rather than selecting the overall average “winner.”**
- Reassess other fundraising 'rules' (e.g. identifiable victim, urgency/scarcity, matching gifts, efficiency/overhead cues, granular impact reporting) for **segment-specific effects**. Many widely accepted tactics may similarly depend on underlying moral (or even other) orientations.
- **Move beyond the “identifiable victim effect” as a default strategy:** while concrete stories can be powerful, this research shows they are not universally superior. Abstract, principle-based framing can outperform concrete appeals for donors with low loyalty values.

The Psychology of Giving: Match the Message to the Mindset



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