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Five Ways to Pick a Charity

by Jeff Rasley
October 21, 2010

Giving money to a worthy cause should be a personally satisfying experience. But for many people donating money is nothing more than the impersonal experience of writing a check. Busy folks might not have the time to be active volunteers for the charities they want to support. So, how to be more involved than just writing a check?

Here are five ways:

1. **Give Direct:** Consider donating directly to a worthy cause versus a big bureaucratic charity that simply divides up your donation into tiny amounts distributed among many different organizations. You decide which particular charity is worthy of your donation. Why leave that personal decision up to someone else?
2. **Take the Time to Decide:** It's your hard earned money. Spend the time to think through what cause or organization you really care about. If you did have the time to devote yourself to a cause or volunteer for a nonprofit organization, what would it be? What stirs your passion? If you love animals, consider your local Humane Society. You should be able to find a charter school to support, if educating children is your special passion. Of course the religious organization that promotes your faith is worthy of your financial support. But you can be even more targeted in your support by designating gifts to particular programs sponsored by the organization.
3. **Ask to See Results:** Modern technologies offer many ways you can see the direct results of your charitable giving from the comfort of your living room couch or office chair. Reports with digital photos can be emailed by staff in response to requests from donors. Most organizations have websites that are regularly updated with news about projects and the organization's initiatives. Every donor has the right, and should exercise it, to see a nonprofit's financials.
4. **Read the Reports and Look at the Pictures:** But you don't need to immerse yourself in the financial minutiae of the charitable organization to feel involved. Enjoy the photos of those kids playing in the shoes you donated. Watch the video posted on the website of the well being dug in that remote mountain village. If you don't have the time to pound nails, you can still enjoy the photos of the house going up.

5. **Require Accountability:** If you're not an accountant and don't want to audit the books of your chosen charity, don't. Just ask to see proof that your money has been used in the way you directed. When you give money to the athletic department of your alma mater to purchase new jerseys for the basketball team, there is nothing wrong with asking for a team photo showing off the team's new outfits. Tracking your donation to make sure it has done what you wanted is your right. And don't be afraid to ask what percentage of the nonprofit's receipts goes to administrative overhead. Any organization that has hefty administrative costs may be more focused on paying its personnel than fulfilling the mission you want to support.

Americans are the most generous givers in the history of the planet. Whipping out the billfold or writing a check to support worthy causes is a regular exercise of most Americans. The transaction can end as nothing more than a simple transfer of funds. Or, it can be the beginning of a satisfying relationship. When the charitable donor and the charitable organization engage in mutual sharing, both sides will find the relationship more meaningful.