

Opinion

Guest Column: Charities going too far to gain contributions

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One day not too long ago, the mailman delivered 15 letters to my door. Twelve of them were from organizations soliciting contributions.

That's 12 different organizations. All of them wanted to reach into my shallow pocket and attach themselves to a couple of my hard-earned dollars.

The organizations sought contributions that included ones to stop gas drilling, to feed hungry Native Americans, to contribute to a political party, to protect the environment, to help disabled children, to stop global warming, to fight racism, and, depending on the group, to save polar bears or tigers or gorillas or rescued horses, dogs or cats.

Now, I have nothing against making a donation to a worthy cause. And most of the ones I just mentioned appear to be very worthy causes that have every right to ask for a few dollars.

But it's the process that disturbs me. I never heard of some of these groups. How did they get my name and address? And why do they think I might be interested in their particular cause?

It's only a matter of time, I tell myself, until I get a solicitation from indigent NBA players or from some band of Occupiers or to help save a failing bank. Matter of fact, didn't I hear recently about a forthcoming campaign to save the gerbils?

Even the few organizations to which I have contributed employ a lot of very annoying habits. Give them a few bucks, and they quickly send you a "thank you" note that includes a solicitation for more money. Or make a contribution early in the year, and within a few months they're asking for more. And if that doesn't produce a response, more mailings are forthcoming with the same message: give us some money.

These organizations have other irritating tricks. They are forever sending you address labels or note pads or calendars or some other unwanted clutter, each time suggesting that their generosity should be rewarded with a donation. If you don't use them quickly — and who does these days? — it doesn't take long to accumulate a stack of unnecessary paper goods.

Don't these people ever stop? It's gotten to be an epidemic. What they apparently don't realize is that if they quit bothering me so much, I might just be inclined to accommodate their demands.

Some groups to which I contribute must send me five or six solicitations a year, each time asking for even more money. About six weeks ago, I sent a small piece of change to a group—an organization focused on saving the world from bad guys and environmental destruction—and since then I have received four — that's right, four — mailings asking for more money.

What nonsense. What a waste of money. All that paper and all that postage spent for nothing. You'd think most of these groups would be interested in saving a few trees.

But, of course, they're helping to keep the U.S. Postal Service in business. And that's a major contribution in itself, given the way the Postal Service is shutting down offices like they had a virus, including the unfathomable—and so far disastrous—decision to close the one and only post office in a local town with a population of 27,000, and replace it with a storefront shop in a traffic-congested strip mall.

We all know that some of these groups have the maddening habit of selling or giving away their list of names to other organizations. That's a shameful practice and ought to be banned. Quite obviously, some charities also use the same marketing firms to put together their mailings. I become a little skeptical when I see the mailing of one group being almost identical to the mailing of another group.

Of course, as the holidays approach each year, the charity groups reach an all-time high in solicitous activity. They send wrapping paper, labels, and Christmas cards. Collectively, they send more Christmas cards than virtually anybody would ever need. Why do they think they have to do this? Take a guess.

Other than not sending any money—a practice that often does nothing to discourage frequent mailings—there is one very effective way of dealing with these solicitors. The state of Pennsylvania has a web site that reveals whether or not a charity is registered with it. Just go to state.pa.gov.charities.

If the charity is registered with the state, the site will tell you what percentage of the income it spends on the actual cause, and what percentage it spends on promotion and administrative costs (such as salaries). As a rule of thumb, if the charity is not spending at least 70 percent of its intake on the job it's supposed to be doing, forget about it. And if it's not even registered, forget about it, too. It might not even be a legitimate charity.

There are an awful lot of shysters out there trying to snatch your money. And even if the causes are legitimate, the ways some of these groups go about getting financial help is not only disturbing, it's downright ridiculous.

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