

**Build Donor Identity or Donor Commitment?
A Dilemma for Not-for-Profit Organisations**

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Abstract

A conceptual model is presented which argues that not-for-profit organisations reliant on donors giving time, money or blood should employ marketing practices that build donors' affective commitment to the organisation, rather than build their role identity as a donor. This strategy is recommended because role identity tends to motivate actions directed to benefiting the self, and is vulnerable when role behaviours are deferred or prevented by the organisation (Meyer, Becker and Van Dick, 2006). In contrast, affective commitment represents a purposeful attachment that is likely to endure even if role behaviours are prevented, and motivate extra-role activities such as positive word-of-mouth and referrals. Based on this model, strategies for enhancing donors' affective commitment are presented.

Keywords: role identity, affective commitment, extra role behaviours, donor retention, donation frequency, not-for-profit.

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Introduction

What drives donation behaviour and donor retention? On the one hand, theories of role identity suggest that being a “donor” is a respected social category, bolstering self-esteem and gaining recognition from others (Callero, 1985). On the other hand, commitment to an organisation and its goals has also been shown to be a consistent predictor of retention and extra-role behaviours, for employees (e.g., Meyer et al., 2002), external customers (e.g., Ahearne, Bhattacharya and Gruen, 2005; Bansal, Irving and Taylor, 2004; Jones, Taylor and Bansal, 2008) and volunteers (Boezeman and Ellemers, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual model which illustrates the differential effects of donor identity and commitment on donor loyalty behaviours. To date, it appears that no study has compared the relative and differential impact of both role identity and commitment on donor loyalty behaviours. In our model, we propose that the development of affective commitment to the organization is a more effective strategy than the development of a donor identity. This is because affective commitment motivates activities that benefit the organisation, rather than purely the self or the identified group (Meyer, Becker and Van Dick, 2006). In an employment context, these helpful activities are known as citizenship behaviours (Organ, 1988), which comprise extra-role behaviours that go beyond expected performance, such as volunteering to help a co-worker with a job-related task. An organisation’s external customers may also engage in extra-role behaviours, such as referrals, positive word-of-mouth, courtesy, flexibility, suggestions for service improvements, sportsmanship, etc (c.f. Bove and Garma, 2006).

Drawing on a range of studies examining employees and non-employees, we begin the paper with an overview of the role identity and commitment literatures. We then present a conceptual framework with hypotheses for empirical testing. Finally we discuss the context for the empirical validation of the model and implications for not-for-profit organizations that depend on donors for their survival.

Role Identity and Commitment

A role identity is a type of identification that encompasses expectations about characteristics and behaviours associated with a social position, such as “accountant”, “parent” or “blood donor” (Charng, Piliavin and Callero, 1988). People generally strive to maintain a positive identity, and do so by making favourable comparisons between the self and a desirable social group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Adopting the identity of a donor – that is, helping another person in need of assistance – begets social approval, promotes a positive self-image and engenders a positive affective state (Williamson and Clark, 1989). When an identity becomes salient, there is a higher probability that a person will engage in behaviours that are consistent with that role (Callero, 1985; Callero, Howard and Piliavin, 1987). Examples of the effects of salient identities include: association members making frequent visits and donations to a museum (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995), alumni promoting and donating to their former university (Arnett, German and Shelby, 2003), and volunteers contributing their time to charity work (Grube and Piliavin, 2000). Key variables affecting the salience of a particular identity include: (a) the extent to which others associate an individual with the role identity, (b) the amount of social support received for the identity (McCall and Simmons, 1978), and (c) the relative size of the individual’s network linked to the role identity (Stryker, 1980).

Commitment refers to a psychological attachment to a target (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001). Allen and Meyer (1990) distinguished three types of commitment: (a) *affective commitment*, referring to an emotional attachment to an organisation, its goals and values, (b) *normative commitment*, referring to a general moral obligation to remain loyal to the organisation, and (c) *continuance commitment*, referring to an attachment based on the utilitarian costs and benefits of remaining with the organisation. Among employees, all three types of commitment have been found to be negatively associated with turnover intentions (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001). However, affective commitment has the strongest, positive relationship with extra-work behaviours; normative commitment has a weaker, but still positive relationship with these behaviours, and continuance commitment has a negligible or negative relationship (Meyer et al., 2002). As this final type of commitment represents a type of attachment based on need (Bansal, Irving and Taylor, 2004), it is unlikely to be relevant to a donation context and will thus be omitted from further discussion.

Role identity and commitment are distinguishable, in terms of both their conceptualisation and their behavioural consequences (Grube and Piliavin, 2000; Meyer, Becker and Van Dick, 2006). Role identity refers to the inclusion of group membership as part of one’s self concept, as well as a sense of similarity to the members of a social collective. This sense of self may include an awareness of shared characteristics (e.g., values), an evaluation of these characteristics, and positive affect (e.g., pride) associated with this evaluation. Identification is claimed to have a largely non-conscious influence on intra- and inter-group activities, such as in-group favouritism and out-group stereotyping (Meyer, Becker and Van Dick, 2006). In contrast, commitment is conceptualised as a type of binding force that motivates a conscious course of action intended to be beneficial to a target. In a work context, such activities may include intentions to remain with an organisation (Van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2006), attendance, job performance, and extra-role behaviours (Meyer et al., 2002).

In summary, role identity and commitment differ both in terms of degree of conscious regulation of behaviour and the immediate relevance of that behaviour to the effective functioning of a target (Meyer, Becker and Van Dick, 2006).

Theoretical Model of Donor Behaviour

Based on these insights into the influence of role identity and commitment on behaviour, the following mode of donor behaviour is proposed. It is expected that this model can be generalised across many types of donations (e.g., time, money or blood) as Lee, Piliavin and Call (1999) found that the influence of role identity was similar across contexts.

With regard to role identity, we propose that donor role salience will encourage associated role behaviours. This source of motivation is presumed to be relatively independent of donors' levels of commitment to the donor organisation. Thus, we expect:

Hypothesis 1: The level of identification with the role of a donor is positively associated with (a) donor retention, and (b) donation frequency.

However, identity salience is likely to be a weaker predictor of other loyalty indicators than commitment, as one could identify with donors as a broad social category, but not necessarily maintain an active relationship with the organisation. As Turner (1982) noted, people often socially identify with groups, even when they have little or no contact with specific members.

With regard to commitment, we propose that both affective and normative commitment will influence donor behaviour. Affective commitment reflects an emotional attachment to a target, based on shared values and goals (Allen and Meyer, 1990). As such, affective commitment has been shown to be a potent motivator of tenure and discretionary behaviours, among employees (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001), members of professional associations (Gruen, Summers and Acito, 2000), service customers (Fullerton, 2003), and volunteers working for charitable organisations (Boezeman and Ellemers, 2007). In light of these findings, we expect in the context of donor organisations:

Hypothesis 2: Affective commitment to the organisation is positively associated with (a) donor retention, (b) donation frequency, and (c) extra-role behaviours.

The second type of commitment, normative commitment, reflects an attachment to a target based on a perceived sense of obligation; that is, it is morally the "right thing to do" (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Although typically a weaker predictor than affective commitment, high levels of normative commitment have been linked to positive organisational consequences, including employee tenure and satisfaction with the organisation (Meyer et al., 2002), as well as volunteers' intentions to remain with their organisation (Boezeman and Ellemers, 2007). Based on these findings, we expect:

Hypothesis 3: Normative commitment will be positively associated with donor retention.

Our model also includes a possible antecedent of both role identity salience and commitment: namely, perceptions of subjective norms concerning donations. Subjective norms are believed to influence role identity, as association with a respected role can bring social recognition from other people (Charng, Piliavin and Callero, 1988). In addition, if peers perceive a clear association between an individual and a particular role identity, this perception will create social expectations about how the individual should behave (Callero, 1985). Based on these expectations, the individual may fear the negative social consequences of discontinuing the role. Indeed, Lee, Piliavin and Call (1999) found that role identity as a blood donor was influenced most strongly by the perceived expectations of significant others. Thus, we expect:

Hypothesis 4: Subjective norms concerning donation are positively associated with donor identity.

In addition, we propose that subjective norms have an effect on normative commitment. Normative commitment develops through socialisation when individuals internalize a set of norms concerning appropriate behaviours from people important to them, such as family and friends (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Normative commitment has two “faces”. The first reflects a “moral imperative” to strive towards outcomes, based on personal standards. The second is an “indebted obligation” to meet the expectations of other people. Based on this second “face”, other people’s expectations about an individual’s donor-related activities should influence their normative commitment, such that:

Hypothesis 5: Subjective norms concerning donation are positively associated with normative commitment to the donor organisation.

In summary, commitment and role identity both lead to donor retention as shown in Figure 1. However, affective commitment to the organisation is likely to contribute to donation frequency and extra role loyalty behaviours such as positive word-of-mouth and referral behaviour, all of which have the potential to contribute to the marketing objectives for not-for-profit organisations.

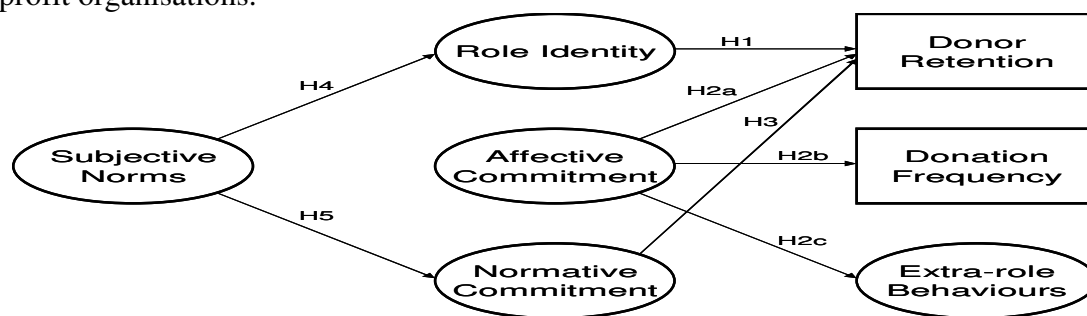


Figure 1: Donor Behaviour Model

Managerial Implications and Future Research

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that many not-for-profit organizations reliant on donors favour marketing practices that build donor identity through the use of cues, such as special events, priority treatment, badges, stickers, t-shirts and memberships. In addition to the missed opportunity for loyalty behaviours there is another potential danger of relying solely on role identities to encourage donor activity. That is, the role identity is vulnerable to factors outside of the control of the organisation, donor temporary or permanent deferrals being one such example. Stryker (1980) suggested that a particular identity will become less salient if it repeatedly causes negative feelings, such as through being “rejected” for a donation. Similarly, McCall and Simmons (1978) argued that successful role performance and the recognition of performance by others is crucial to legitimising role identity. Thus, if a donor is turned away on one occasion, a “failure” to donate may reduce the salience of the identity as a donor, and with it the motivation to continue as a donor. Indeed, with respect to blood donation, Hillgrove (2009) found that donors who were temporarily deferred due to low haemoglobin levels reduced the frequency of their later donations, and were more likely to become non-donors in subsequent years.

As not-for-profit organisations cannot always control the circumstances leading to deferrals and thus reduced donor identity salience, a logical step would be to buffer their impact by developing affective commitment to the organisation. Meyer et al.'s (2002) meta-analytic review of the antecedents of commitment suggests a range of commitment-building strategies that could be adopted by charitable organisations.

Foremost among the factors leading to affective commitment is perceived organisational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), which charitable organisations could cultivate by showing donors that their contributions are highly valued, and that the organisation cares for their personal well-being. Other important antecedents include interactional justice (Greenberg, 1990), procedural justice (Leventhal, Karuza and Fry, 1980), and distributive justice (Deutsch, 1975), which imply that frontline employees should treat donors with dignity and respect, and be open in sharing information about the fairness of the organisation's procedures and distribution of commodities collected from the donor. Role clarity and lack of role conflict are also important antecedents, suggesting that organisations could benefit by providing a clear structure and expectations for different kinds of donor roles, and provide flexible working arrangement for donors who contribute volunteer service (Bliese and Castro, 2000). Finally, the review indicates the importance of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), suggesting that organisations could cultivate affective commitment by articulating a compelling vision of the future, and linking that vision to the activities and contributions of donors (Lowe, Kroeck and Sivasubramaniam, 1996).

Beyond the Organisational Behaviour literature, the Relationship Marketing literature offers trust as the key antecedent to affective commitment (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Donors would be reluctant to feel affective commitment for the organisation unless they had confidence in the organisation's ability to put the donation to an appropriate use (reliability/credibility), and in its willingness to avoid any behaviour that could be detrimental to them (benevolence). Although trust can be built in the organisation's brand, where the donor personally interacts with the organisation, it can be more readily built via the organisation's personnel. Indeed customers' (donors') judgements based on the relational characteristics of the organisation's personnel will be stronger, more confident, and more strongly linked to outcomes than their judgements based on the relational characteristics of the organisation (brand) (Palmatier et al., 2006).

The model will be empirically tested with blood donors in Australia. The Australian Red Cross Blood Service (ARCBS), a monopoly collection agency operates under a voluntary, non-remunerated blood donation principle. This unique context provides an opportunity to distinguish between donors' identification with blood donors as a social category, as well as normative commitment to blood donation and affective commitment to the ARCBS.

Conclusion

Donor retention is crucial to not-for-profit organisations and although the development of a "donor" role identity assists this, it is vulnerable when the donor is deferred. Further, extra role helpful behaviours directed to the organisation are unlikely to be forthcoming as this does not directly benefit the donor in terms of increased their pride or respect. By contrast, affective commitment is conducive to extra role behaviours which benefit the target organisation and these are likely to continue even if the donor is deferred.

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