

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Viewpoint
The #GivingTuesday Model
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VIEWPOINT

The #GivingTuesday Model

The social sector has a lot to learn from the innovation network that has emerged from the post-Thanksgiving global giving movement.

BY ASHA CURRAN

The social sector has faced the same basic challenges for a long time now: the endless chase for funding, the struggle to attract talent and maintain basic operations, and the constant need to lobby for itself in the public sphere. For all their good intentions and sense of purpose, sector leaders still complain of low levels of collaboration and innovation in confronting these stubborn problems. A 2017 survey by The Bridgespan Group and the Rockefeller Foundation found that although 80 percent of nonprofit leaders agree that innovation is an “urgent imperative,” just 40 percent of those leaders think their organizations are actually set up to innovate. All of these issues pose a significant danger to progress and sustainability.

For the last seven years, I’ve been one of the leaders of the giving movement #GivingTuesday (GT). Created as a day of popular giving following two days of post-Thanksgiving consuming—Black Friday and Cyber Monday—GT is now a global, year-round movement that drives hundreds of millions of dollars in giving annually in the United States and continues to spread to dozens of other countries on every continent in the world. Through this work, I have seen how social sector leaders from across the globe are responding to our shared challenges. The examples they set help us all to understand the changes we need to make.

GT offers such potential as a learning experiment because it is an adaptable idea that serves different needs at different times within different communities. It’s more than simply a day of fundraising, though it is raising significant funds for nonprofits. It’s an

online and offline movement, within which ideas and resources are built and shared, and cultures of generosity, the bedrock of a healthy civil society, are flourishing.

THE POWER OF THE NETWORK

GT was created in 2012 at the 92nd Street Y, a prestigious New York cultural institution (with no history of creating social media movements). At the time, Twitter was just taking off; memes such as #MeToo and #NeverAgain were years away. In its infancy, GT was an experiment to answer a series of open questions: Could social media be used to spread generosity and make giving go viral? Could it change cultural norms and behaviors around giving? Would people want to post about the issues they cared about as much as how many miles they ran that morning or what they ordered for lunch?

The answers turned out to be yes. GT created a surge of enthusiasm in its first year both in the sector and among the public. In its first year, \$10 million was donated online, with 2,500 nonprofits signing on to the idea. The number of dollars donated in the United States increased by double-digit percentages every year. More than \$300 million was donated in 2017, again, online only, in just the 24 hours of the day itself.

What’s more, we can be certain that these numbers are underreported, since online giving is roughly 10 percent of all giving and the dollar number is the aggregate total of only some of the roughly 150 giving platforms. Of people who give on GT, roughly 75 percent are existing donors and 25 percent are new ones, demonstrating that the day offers potential to engage both an existing constituency and flocks of new, interested givers. GT doesn’t take money away from other days of the year, either: Similar to disaster relief campaigns, GT creates a giving spike but with no corresponding dip in giving the rest of the year.

GT has become ubiquitous. In the United States, more than 100 local community campaigns have formed, from entire states such as Illinois and New York to tiny towns such as Bethel, Alaska, and Boothbay Harbor, Maine. Perhaps most remarkably, it has spread across

the world, with official movements in 46 countries and unofficial activity in dozens more. The leaders of these movements, representing nonprofits, nonprofit alliances, giving platforms, marketing companies, fundraising associations, and community foundations, come from every corner of the globe, speak more than 20 languages, and operate within vastly diverse cultural, philanthropic, and historical landscapes.

Despite this diversity, these leaders have formed a thriving, highly interconnected network to address



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these common problems. They communicate year-round—via WhatsApp, through e-mail, and at in-person meet-ups and convenings—about the progress of the movement in their regions, mistakes made, lessons learned, and best practices discovered. The informal principles guiding the network are generosity, transparency, humor, iteration, and mutual reinforcement and encouragement. They question conventional nonprofit wisdom, and they are frustrated by stagnation and repetition. Giving is the common thematic interest of the network, but they also share a broader commitment to social justice and democratic values.

LESSONS LEARNED

So what can we learn from GT's results so far, from its network of leaders, and from the global giving innovation lab they are building together? I would highlight seven lessons.

Think about the social sector as a global solutions network. It is extraordinary in this age how rapidly a great new idea can spread across borders. Given the common challenges we are all facing, even if our work is hyper-local, we should challenge ourselves to think about how broadly we can share ideas that might benefit others. If we can learn from, and mimic, the way GT's global leaders share best practices year-round, we will see at scale the uptake of ideas and experiments spreading through different spheres, as quickly as one colleague leaning over to the adjacent desk and saying, "Hey, try this ..."

Become fluent in data. Formed in 2015 by GT's leadership team, the #GivingTuesday Data Collaborative is committed not only to growing the movement, but also to measuring and learning all we can from the available data about the movement, giving trends, and behaviors more broadly. We don't all need to be data scientists, but we do need to be, or have access to, "code-switchers"—those who can translate data from those who know it best to those who need to understand its applications, perils, and possibilities. We should understand how to best use our own data—productively, safely, responsibly—and also how and when to pool

it for collective analysis and understanding. There is a risk in sharing, but greater potential for reward.

Rethink "branding." #GivingTuesday is an intentionally "unbranded" idea. It's a movement that can be adapted and co-owned by diverse communities, organizations, or individuals, and changed to reflect diverse identities. This idea of co-ownership is key to its growth; it is made by many, governed by many, and changed by many. The way people interact with causes (and everything else) in the digital age is fundamentally different from a generation ago. We can't expect donors to be unquestioningly loyal to a logo anymore; their relationship to giving is intimate and fast-moving. GT resonates because giving is collective, celebratory, and transformational, rather than transactional.

Adapt to rapidly changing technology. Facebook disrupted #GivingTuesday in 2017 by processing \$45 million in donations and, the following day, announcing that it was permanently waiving any fees on donations and setting up an annual matching fund. Other major tech platforms have pursued or will soon enter the online giving game. The implications of this—and of direct person-to-person giving, workplace giving, recurring monthly giving, and soaring online and mobile giving, not to mention the overall effects of social media itself—are far from clear yet. But they are happening, and while we may parse the negatives and positives, we must be agile enough to use available tools to our benefit.

Switch from a scarcity mind-set to a collaborative mind-set. In the run-up to #GivingTuesday 2017, many predicted lower levels of giving due to "donor fatigue." We'd just concluded a season that included huge spikes of giving after hurricanes Harvey and Maria, as well as record donations motivated by politics and activism. But 2017 GT giving rose nearly 80 percent over the previous year. For too long, nonprofits have seen each other as competitors for the same finite pool of donor dollars. But what if that pie is far bigger than we have assumed? Givers

are ready and willing to give, and nongivers are just waiting to be invited to the table. Particularly with the massive younger generations of Millennials and Generation Z becoming the next generations of givers, a mind-set shift here is critical. When we work together, and when we tell a meaningful collective story about the things we are trying to achieve, we can tap into more and better giving—perhaps more than we ever assumed possible.

Reimagine the nonprofit leader of the 21st century. #GivingTuesday creator Henry Timms is coauthor of the 2018 best-seller *New Power*, a body of thinking about new and emerging leaders that was informed by #GivingTuesday's growth. Such leaders, he writes, will be able to harness the passions of grassroots communities and to "structure for participation"—that is, to build organizations, movements, and initiatives that are designed to be shaped by the many. This means being a leader who not only creates many other leaders but also cultivates and supports inclusive, generative networks of them. If GT's network of leaders is any indication, the sector's most high-potential leaders are empathetic, entrepreneurial, collaborative, transparent, peer-driven, data-fluent, and eager both to innovate and to replicate what is already being done well. Even though they are visionaries and can be charismatic, they are peer-driven and low-ego.

Understand how movements matter. #BlackLivesMatter, #NeverAgain, and #MeToo are ushering in real changes. #GivingTuesday has generated hundreds of millions of donated dollars and global philanthropic collaboration. It's time to stop arguing about whether social media can have material impacts and start harnessing and channeling their flows of communication and power.

We must also realize that these movements and their leaders won't look the way we've expected them to in the past. But their voices and skills matter more than ever—as much as they should have before—and the more prepared we are to hear them, the better off we will all be. ■