



Let's not be drunk under the streetlight, the LeRoys urge. Illustration: Tom Jones will work his magic during December's pubTV pledge drive.

This is the brain on pledge drives

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It is quite easy to whine and carry on about on-air fundraising and pledge specials. Regardless of where you stand, to paraphrase the old saying, "If you keep doing what you are doing, you will keep getting what you're getting."

Present pledge practices (along with certain membership practices) have resulted in fewer pledges, reduced ratings, and increased lapsing by members. The file is shrinking while the average pledge grows. We think things will get worse because of two factors in the structure of American life.

First, given demographic trends, the older age cohorts will continue to get smaller, because the Silent Generation — the Depression babies — was never as large as the GI Generation, whose youngest member is now 80. And the next generation moving toward retirement, the Baby Boomers, has proven to be much less inclined to donate than its parents.

Second, media audiences will continue to fragment as new cable channels, DBS satellites, computer games and the Internet vie for audience attention. The result

will continue to be shrinking audiences for all broadcast media, including public TV.

In examining fundraising practices, we recall the tale of the drunk looking for his car keys under a streetlight. The drunk is asked why he's looking under the streetlight when he lost the keys over in the parking lot. He replies: But this is where I can see.

When we examine pledge drives, their practices and foibles, we are often like the drunk under the streetlight. It is easy to see what fills the screen during a pledge drive or all that direct mail we receive. As others have suggested, public television needs to peer into the shadows to better understand pledge drives and their consequences.

Why blind people smile

As you might suspect, human nature is a big part of the problem.

Why do blind people smile when they are happy? Many of them have never seen a smile, but somehow their face knows which muscles to contract. They also somehow know the rules about when to smile. Much of human nature, why we behave the way we do, is not under the streetlight for us to see but in the shadows. It's wired into our nervous system.

We are all prisoners of a worldview taught when we grew up and went to school. There is a cottage industry of *New York Times* best sellers devoted to what we are learning these days about human nature and why we behave the way we do. *Nova* is in on the action: They did a story on mirror neurons in January.

New knowledge about the brain gives us insights into pledge premium price points and other details of interaction with the public, but here we will focus on a few key findings that influence not only the people who pledge but also, more importantly, the ones who run the pledge drives.

Lightning judgments on pledge specials

Let us take one example—the day PBS sends the Big Doc—a long e-mail detailing available specials for the next pledge drive. The document goes on for pages.

Pledge professionals absorb the information and have a staff meeting to chew it over. Their most common reactions: “There is nothing to pledge!” or “I don't know why we pay the money for such #*\$Z.” Every drive, many settle into gloomy expectations that they'll never make goal.

People's first reactions are crucial in most situations, but what about these first reactions to the Big Doc? Our answer is these reactions are perfectly normal. We were wired for it, because negative reactions are normal. Almost all basic human emotions are negative (fear, disgust). There are only two positive ones—surprise and happiness/love. It takes lots of social training to become that sweet, warm, social person you are now. Women are better than men in acquiring the social veneer that allows civilization even to exist. But regardless of veneer, most first intuitions or evaluations are negative.

Second, we seek out only enough information to make a decision (usually a small amount, hence the term “thin slicing”). While some people collect tons of information and make lists of pros and cons before they decide to buy a car or a house, the social science research suggests that such lists are usually useless. In deciding to buy a car or to stay home tonight, we automatically sense our “feelings” first and seek out more information only if we need it. We base decisions on the thinnest of evidence. Thin slicing is a lot like intuition. How many times have you seen someone start to read a memo and within a few seconds say, “that will never work.” (All of this recent brain science research is summed up in the book *How Customers Think* by Harvard professor Gerald Zaltman [[Barnes & Noble](#)].)

In the fundraising office, thin slicing means pledge pros make decisions without having to read the whole description or watch the whole pledge program. (In all fairness, some later change their minds, but usually only after another station pledges it first.)

Why do we decide so fast? Rapid evaluation is a mechanism with huge implications for pledge professionals. When we see a new pledge host, for instance, we know in a nanosecond whether we like and trust that person. We sense our evaluation even before we have words to explain it. With cognitive equipment left over from our caveperson days, when it was important to instantly identify threats, we are hard-wired to evaluate things instantly.

What are the implications of this research for making decisions about evaluating and perhaps improving pledge and membership practices?

Malcolm Gladwell, both in *The Tipping Point* and this year with *Blink*, has popularized much of this current research (see more about the findings on our website, www.tracmedia.com). We recommend both books, especially *Blink*. We want to discuss just two phenomena: why experts are such lousy predictors of mass taste, and how hidden prejudices can retard change.

To every experience people have, they bring the hard-wiring of their nervous systems and the feelings they have acquired over a lifetime. But people thin-slice their evaluations so differently that even experts — in music, for example — are often wrong about what will be popular with the public. That's why media

companies spend small fortunes testing records and TV pilots. The experts' experiences are deeper and more sophisticated than naïve listeners/viewers, but thin-slicing defeats them. Their innate experiences are unlike those of naïve consumers who will buy the record or pledge.

For pledge professionals the question is: When you thin-slice, are you evaluating from the point of view of the expert or the naïve viewer?

Behind the screen: hidden prejudices

In *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell devotes a chapter to how people's prejudices can unconsciously influence their judgments. Even people who think they are being objective are subtly influenced in their decisions by unconscious feelings. In the symphony orchestra world, for example, few women held key positions until the past decade or so. Observers suspected prejudices were influencing the audition process. (Do you really think the French horn is a women's instrument?) To remove prejudice from audition decisions, candidates performed behind a screen. The judges could draw conclusions only from listening to the performance. The result? There are far more women in major orchestras, including a few diminutive French horn players. Alas, as recent events in Baltimore have shown—the controversy over the appointment of Marin Alsop as the first female conductor—suggests that prejudice against women still persists.

The example suggests it will be hard to change some pledge and membership practices. Pledge professionals are afflicted with unconscious feelings and prejudices or, even worse, "common sense" — another term for the conventional wisdom or prejudice.

Consider these questions: Why is pledge necessary? What should pledge achieve besides raising money? Are there other ways to define membership?

What were your answers? Reflect on how fast the answers popped into your mind. Human nature is human nature. If you keep doing things the way, etc., etc.

Like the conductors hiring instrumentalists, we need to erect a screen and allow ourselves to judge our pledge and membership practices objectively. It is going to be difficult to change the current pledge culture, but we should at least re-examine things critically, leaving preconceived judgments in neutral as much as possible.

Hormones and the accidental member

For the past decade, development officers' major theme, coda, mantra or rant about public TV pledge drives has been about transactional members and why they seldom remain as members. TRAC has reams of research on the subject. As the years passed we at TRAC have come to think of transactional pledgers as accidental members who were induced to pledge because of the pledge

program, clever positioning of premiums and price points, and a particular hormonal state.

Many stations have become quite expert in attracting these hormonal viewers to the file. They know the hot buttons in programs about money (Suze Orman, especially), music (primal like Celtic music or nostalgic like doo-wop) and programs about spirituality and identity (Wayne Dyer or Deepak Chopra).

When you interview accidental members in depth, they don't sound like members, they don't watch TV like members and they don't donate like members. They are younger than members, less educated, hold fewer positive attitudes toward public TV and view fewer of its program genres. Pledge and scheduling practices that succeed with hormonal pledgers, however, are hijacking key dayparts and undercutting public TV's appeal to its core members.

Unintended consequences

With accidental members, public TV is getting unintended consequences. Bringing them in to fix the short-term revenue problem creates a long-term problem, with people lapsing off the file, especially those of the Silent Generation. To keep pledge proceeds growing, stations cut into their regular schedules for more and more pledging. While development officers may debate which results are negative, most agree that something less than positive has been happening.

In [our Current article April 11](#), we outlined what distinguishes public TV's core viewers from its light viewers. Basically, the core viewers are engaged by the intellectually dense programming that characterizes much of the NPS series. Core viewers are interested in viewing many of the various genres and are intellectually curious. They are better educated than average, well off and have high self-esteem. They are the civic backbone of most communities.

Many are annoyed because (1) their favorite programs are replaced by specials designed for hormonal pledgers, (2) they sometimes object to those same specials and (3) they object even more strongly if the station plays the special repeatedly over the course of the pledge drive. Many reject the notion that the inconvenience of pledge is a fair price to pay for public TV since they're already paying their dues.

But what about the core viewers who are not members? If all our core viewers — 22 percent of the primetime cume audience — supported us on a regular basis, we would have a substantial, predictable revenue stream. We don't.

What moves some of the core viewers to renew year after year? People who give regularly to non-church charities of any kind are rare — only 25 percent to 30 percent of households, according to some experts. Those who donate tend to

give to many charities. They volunteer, read newspapers, vote and, most importantly, they listen to public radio. But simply loving public TV doesn't automatically make you a member. The members not only find that public TV satisfies their intellectual curiosity but they also have a donative nature.

The conventional wisdom is that donative behavior, at its purest, is a form of altruism. There is considerable controversy about how much is learned and how much is innate. Since this controversy will not be resolved soon, let's simply assume that at some stage in a person's life, donative behavior can be taught or nurtured. Many may learn it at their mothers' knees, and there is some reason to believe that an institution like a public TV station can help elicit donative behavior. We propose further research to learn more about how that can happen. Meanwhile, our friends at South Carolina ETV have a successful campaign to teach viewers that public TV "can't live on love alone."

Focus on cultivation and retention

Common sense as well as research evidence suggests we may be irritating and alienating our core constituencies. If we knew how to make surefire programs that work with all of our audiences, our problems would be solved. But real hits seem to be more like alchemy than science. When we have hit specials like *Riverdance* or Three Tenors, light viewers and core viewers alike have pleasant memories and warm feelings about the station. The phones ring by themselves and the money rolls in.

But, like a farmer who has repeatedly planted crops that leach nutrients from the soil, we have to learn new practices to save the farm.

It seems prudent to develop better relationships with core viewers and members. We are most impressed by examples like the Listening Project at WVIZ in Cleveland, where the station has been probing the viewers and listeners for four years. ([Results from four Listening Project surveys](#) on WVIZ's website.) Keeping members and core viewers is far easier than attracting new ones, but we suspect very few stations have extensive member programs to retain and cultivate core viewers.

What would a member cultivation and retention program look like? How would it work? Hallmark, the greeting card company, certainly laid out most of the key elements for such a program in its book *Emotion Marketing* [[Amazon.com](#)]. We have also addressed some of these issues in our paper "Connecting the Dots" (2004 [PowerPoint presentation](#) by TRAC's Craig Reed).

There is an old saying that "friends come and go, but enemies accumulate." Core viewers have a long history with the station, its programming and its fundraising, and for many that includes an accumulation of petty irritations across decades of viewing. It's time to take a closer look at this valuable resource. It's time to talk

with these folks and cultivate them. In a time of increasingly fragmented viewing, they have made the choice to stay with us. We should be rewarding that choice, so that they continue to invest their time and membership dollars with public television.