Commentary: **Is charity becoming more about me? That's not always a bad thing**
By **Andy Sim**, December 3rd, 2017 (www.channelnewsasia.com)

SINGAPORE: **Technology has dramatically changed charitable giving.**

Remember the Chope Food for the Needy movement in 2014, when people purchased hawker meals for beneficiaries in advance? Today, technology lets us do the same without the hassle of visiting an eatery and exchanging physical cash.

On the dining app BevEat for instance, people can buy a meal for charities and track when meals have been claimed via their smartphones.

With the rise of crowdfunding platforms, non-profit movements have cottoned onto cause marketing and are seeing the value in good storytelling.

The savvy ones now leverage popular digital and mobile channels, to go where their customers are. Just a few months ago, local soup kitchen Willing Hearts worked with Deliveroo to enable people to donate on the popular food delivery app – as easy as ordering pizza.

But among some quarters, there are concerns that these developments point to a worrying trend in charitable giving – one that panders to an increasingly demanding giver who wants the gift of charity to be easy and on-demand.

As part of the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC)'s Futures of Giving 2025 research conducted earlier this year, one development we spotted in the social sector is the growing "retailisation" of giving as non-profits increasingly market directly to individuals. More charities are adopting the tactics of brand marketers, using influencer campaigns, social media marketing, and gamified charity drives.

With non-profits realising the need for more sophisticated business-to-consumer models, we are hearing of more givers behaving like picky customers. We have come across more accounts of givers expecting non-profit organisations (NPOs) to "serve" them by accommodating their schedules and making volunteer activities more "comfortable".

This mindset extends to businesses as well, with 49 per cent of corporates expecting NPO partners to host well-organised corporate giving programmes, according to NVPC's Corporate Giving Survey 2015.

Millennials are also changing the game with their aspirations to make a difference. But they may unwittingly place more pressure on non-profits. Raised on mobile phones, this generation expects giving to be convenient, for charities to be digitally-savvy and to partake in what they define as "meaningful" volunteer experiences.

As charities find themselves catering more to such demands, it raises questions: Is giving becoming more about self-gratification, instead of helping others? Should we be concerned?

END OF JUDGMENT

Make no mistake, we must always keep beneficiaries at the core of any charity. But fixating on whether givers today are more "selfish" - making charity worth less – misses the mark.

It is worth addressing whether this trend bears out among millennials upfront, because they bear the most flak for being self-absorbed and demanding. But we have found that the retailisation of giving is a phenomenon that cuts across age groups.

Saying that millennials are more self-centred in their giving is perhaps an unfair accusation. Studies suggest that this generation is highly value-driven, has a strong moral compass, and feels more accountable for many global issues.

What can be said is that unlike previous generations who viewed their personal and charitable lives as separate, millennials see the two as integrated – making their philanthropic and volunteering efforts very much a part of their individual identity.

They are more likely to seek "meaningful" jobs that align with their values. And when they share their volunteering efforts online for instance, it does not necessarily mean they are doing good out of vanity.

It is their way to advocate for causes they are passionate about, and to curate their identities in an age where traditional markers of identity are waning.

With millennials poised to form half the global workforce by 2020, we must not ignore their charitable motivations.

Broadly speaking, I think the "me first" attitude toward giving disturbs people because it challenges purist visions of what charity should be: That it should be done selflessly, without fanfare, for it to count.

The danger is that this thinking veers into moral superiority, and can lead us to divide the world into those who give well and those who give badly.

But have things ever been so clear-cut? Many acts of giving are deeply personal and self-interested, such as supporting cancer research because a family member was stricken by the disease, or volunteering as a way to expand your circle of friends.

Some argue that this is fine, as long as there is a net benefit to society. Giving need not be the total disavowal of self – you can uplift yourself as you uplift others with you.

The other danger of holding a binary mindset is that we risk imposing high barriers for doing good, making it seem daunting and unrewarding – which should never be the case.

In NVPC's ongoing conversations with individuals to find out why they do not give, we were struck by responses that said doing good was "very hard". Some felt that charity required big time commitments, purity of intent and specialised skills which they lacked. If they wanted to volunteer, they felt they had to do it "properly", or not at all.

Basically, doing nothing was better, because taking action was too difficult.

But inaction will have a bigger price. In today's attention economy, we risk losing well-meaning individuals to other activities that demand their time – like shopping or gaming.

Why not harness this growing human need for instant gratification for good?

ADOPTING A JOURNEY MENTALITY

One counter-argument is that we should never blindly subscribe to the thinking that the "ends justify the means". If a person gives for misguided reasons, he can do more harm than good.

This is absolutely true. But let us think of solutions instead of dismissing those who don't do charity in accordance with our worldview.

The problem with the old mindset is that we fixate on a person's intent, without considering how intent can be influenced and re-shaped.

The constructive way forward lies in viewing individuals on a "giving journey".

People start their philanthropic journeys at different points. Some start knowing exactly who and how they want to serve. Others stumble in by accident, out of peer pressure or sheer curiosity.

But through their experiences, they are changed. They learn about the cause, understand the gaps, and become a more involved giver. Taking a journey mindset towards charity and volunteerism moves the conversation away from motive, and accepts that individuals can grow and be transformed along the way.

This is not a revolutionary idea. Businesses use the idea of customer journeys to understand how individuals engage with a brand through multiple touchpoints. Regardless of how they come to know the brand, the important thing is to harness every interaction and convert people into becoming a loyal customer.

When applied to givers, the hows and whys of people's giving become less material.

What is important is process: Nurturing a relationship with potential givers, engaging them in dialogue, and encouraging them to advance on their path.

This empowers all of us - leaders, teachers, friends and neighbours - to be change-agents: We can be stewards, guiding would-be givers further along.

Charities are also no longer cast in a passive role waiting for resources; they can intervene to influence volunteers and donors, and steer conversation on issues.

ONE SOLUTION: DIGITAL GIVING SOLUTIONS?

The challenge, of course, is that journeying with someone takes effort.

What complicates things is that people don't start their journeys in any prescribed manner nowadays. They give in ways that make sense to them, on channels they like to use. This plurality is exciting but a challenge to manage, especially for small charities.

Technology has often been blamed for the state we are in. But having worked in tech companies for most of my career, I am optimistic that it can also provide solutions.

The rise of the digital platform economy is an instructive example. The value of platforms like Airbnb and Taobao is not in the goods they produce (and they don't produce any), but in the infrastructures they create that can capture millions of messy, unpredictable interactions in a single eco-system. They connect the dots in ways that make sense, and empower people to share, trade and build things of value.

Can we adapt this solution to help charities manage the chaos?

Non-profits are already using social media platforms to self-mobilise and raise awareness for causes.

Interestingly, we also see some digital eco-systems geared toward giving. For instance, non-profit crowdfunding platforms and time-banking apps that let members exchange skills and experiences in return for time credit.

In the same vein, NVPC's online giving portal, Giving.sg, empowers individuals and groups including businesses and schools to choose various ways to give back, be it volunteering, donating or fund-raising.

Because all the activity is contained in one space, it is easier for non-profits to consolidate efforts, and track and measure their digital outreach to volunteers and donors. Crucially, they can use those insights to nudge people further along their giving journeys.

The hope is that such platforms grow, become more sophisticated, and become integrated with other popularly-used apps and sites, so they are more enmeshed in people's lives.

Ultimately, this can give charities powerful tools to manage a more vocal and engaged public, who want to give – but in ways of their choosing.

SHARED NARRATIVES

Finally, as exciting as technology may be, it must be augmented with shared narratives in society – common causes that can bring people together.

If people cannot see a destination, their journey will be directionless. Which is why charities need to persist in what they have long done – articulating vision, and continually engaging the public on issues that demand social attention.

Government bodies and the media, can share information, so that the community is armed with knowledge on society's needs, and can help create solutions - leveraging existing tools like digital platforms. The vision and the tools (technology) go hand-in-hand to enable action.

We waste time quibbling over whether giving is selfish or selfless, good or bad. People may never agree on the best way to give.

But they can agree on purpose. And will unite behind shared purpose.

So let us give them something to get behind.