

How to design a digital donor decision architecture



INTRODUCTION

The principles of **decision science** can be adapted to enhance online fundraising strategies, making digital giving more intuitive, engaging, and effective. This guide builds focuses on digital donor journeys, online engagement, and conversion optimisation.

We'll work through these five key stages in sequence:

Stage 1: Clarify the Challenge

Stage 2: Design the Donor Journey

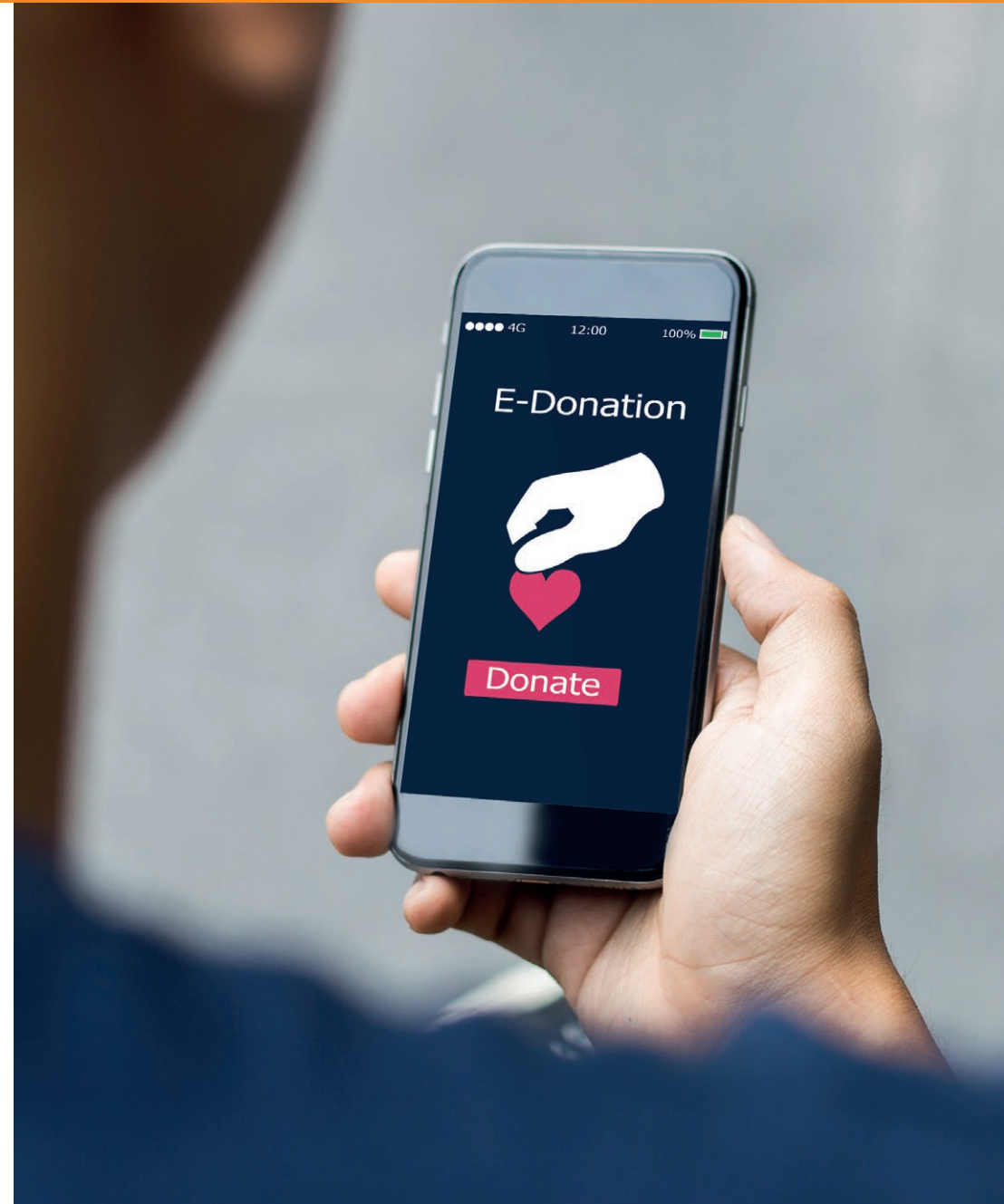
Stage 3: Identify Online Barriers

Stage 4: Build Digital Boosters

Stage 5: Test and Optimize

Want to know more?

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Stage 1 : Clarify the Challenge

In an online fundraising environment, understanding your audience is crucial. Digital giving behaviors are influenced by:

- **User intent:** Are they casually browsing, responding to an appeal, or motivated by a specific event?
- **Platform Engagement:** Are they interacting via social media, email, or a direct website visit?
- **Friction points:** Where do they drop off in the donation process? How can you reduce this and make engagement smoother?

Example

We want online visitors aged 45+ to complete a \$50 donation via the website's 'Quick Give' button within three minutes of landing on the page.

Optimizing for Online Donor Behaviour

Use real-time tracking and analytics to assess donor behaviour, identifying:

- Abandonment rates at various point in the process.
- Click-through effectiveness of different appeals.
- Click through rates of different channels: **email, Facebook, X**, etc.
- Social media leading to giving- which channel and message?

Stage 2 : Design the Donor Journey

Online donor experiences should be structured to reduce decision fatigue and encourage action. Key elements include:

1. Website Decision Architecture

- **Streamlined donation forms:** where appropriate use of auto-filled fields and minimal steps tell people there are three/five steps.
- **Pre-set donation amounts:** leveraging social norms but ensure people can enter own amounts and offer agency.
- **Urgency indicators:** countdowns for matching gifts, limited time appeals.

2. Social Media & Email Integration

- **Pre-suasion** leading donors to act after reading compelling stories and then adding number anchors or images creating oxytocin responses.
- **Personalized call-to-action (CTA)** using dynamic content based on past interactions.
- **Retargeting strategies** for those who visited but didn't donate. Use an appropriate pop-up or an AI chatbot to answer questions.

Stage 3 : Identify Online Barriers

Understanding friction points in digital fundraising is critical. Common barriers include:

Barrier	Example	Solution
Confusing navigation	Visitors struggle to find the donation button.	Place a prominent sticky CTA on all pages. Place top right or next to CTA.
Lack of trust	Donors hesitate due to security concerns.	Use trust badges and testimonials or accreditations, ie: <i>Registered Charity</i> .
Decision overload	Too many donation options lead to inaction.	Offer a maximum of three-tiered choices (e.g., \$/£20, \$/£50, \$/£100). Signal preferred choice.
Mobile friction	Difficult checkout on phones. Too many steps?	Implement one-click mobile giving and make sure your mobile page is fluent.
Social influence gaps	No visible community engagement.	Show real-time donation updates . This can be towards targets or progress.

Stage 4 : Build Digital Boosters

Applying **MINDSPACE** to the message you create. This is a common framework.

MINDSPACE Principle	Digital Application
MESSENGER	Email appeals signed by an appropriate individual.
INCENTIVES	Limited match. ("Your gift doubled for 24 hours!")
NORMS	Displaying "X people have donated in the last hour".
DEFAULTS	Pre-selecting monthly giving on donation forms.
SALIENCE	Using bold CTAs and compelling visuals to stand out.
PRIMING	Displaying engaging stories before asking for a gift
AFFECT	Featuring emotionally charged videos on donation pages.
COMMITMENT	Encouraging small pledges first ("Start with £/\$5").
EGO	Offering recognition , especially for repeat donors.

Stage 5 : Test and Optimize

Continuous experimentation is key to optimising digital fundraising campaigns. Human behaviour is irrational but predictable. But you mustn't rely on your own assumptions or preferences. This can lead to missed opportunities. Instead, testing different elements allows you to identify what works best for driving donations and engagement for your target market.

Key Testing Methods

1. A/B TESTING (SPLIT TESTING)

Compare two versions of a fundraising element (e.g., email subject lines, CTA buttons, images) to see which performs better.

Example: Testing "Donate Now" vs. "Make an Impact Today" as a call-to-action (CTA). To implement this:

- Send one version to 50% of your audience and another version to the other 50%.
- Measure key metrics like click-through rates (CTR), conversion rates, and donation amounts.

2. MULTIVARIATE TESTING (MVT)

Similar to A/B testing but involves testing multiple variables at the same time.

Example: Testing different combinations of CTA buttons, images, and donation form layouts to find the most effective mix.

3. TIME-BASED TESTING (DAY & HOUR OPTIMIZATION)

Different audiences engage at different times. Testing when to send emails or post on social media can maximize impact.

Example: Comparing donation rates for emails sent at 8 AM vs. 6 PM.

4. SEGMENTATION-BASED TESTING

Different groups may respond differently to the same message.

Example: Testing if younger donors prefer short-form content while older donors prefer long-form stories.

Key Testing Principles

- **Test one variable at a time:** Avoid changing multiple things at once unless using multivariate testing.
- **Use a large enough sample size:** Ensure results are statistically significant.
- **Run tests for an appropriate duration:** Short tests can lead to misleading conclusions.
- **Analyse and iterate:** Use insights gained to refine future campaigns and build on what works.

Want a mini-case study? Refuge.

Refuge, a UK-based charity supporting women and children affected by domestic abuse, exemplifies the application of behavioral science principles on [its donation page](#) to enhance donor engagement and contributions.

1. Messenger

The page features testimonials from survivors, such as:

“I feel like a human and a woman again. Refuge has helped me find my own identity.”

These authentic voices add credibility and emotional resonance, encouraging potential donors to [contribute.refuge.org.uk](#).

2. Incentives

Refuge offers a weekly lottery, providing donors with a chance to win prizes while supporting the cause:

“Entering the lottery is not just a chance to win incredible prizes, it is a chance to show you stand with women against domestic abuse...”

This approach combines altruism with the excitement of potential rewards.

3. Norms

Supporters should see:

- Messages from other supporters similar to them emphasising how fulfilling making a gift has been.
- Signals that many donors/on average people give at this level, perhaps highlighting this as below in the **Doctors without Borders** example.
- If possible, a counter or progress bar signalling that others are joining in, for example: **“1531 people have contributed today.”**

4. Defaults

Pre-set donation amounts are suggested, simplifying decision-making:

- £25 could pay for essentials for a woman arriving at a refuge.
- £5 a month could provide ongoing emotional support for a child.

These defaults guide donors towards meaningful contributions.

5. Salience

The page uses compelling visuals and bold calls-to-action to capture attention, emphasizing the urgency and importance of donations.

Notice how they use a special occasion Mothers’ Day to signal “Donate in honour of your mum.” Linking an awareness of that special day with the desire to honour someone you love, maybe without the tacky card you so often default to. If you do donate they send them a personalised e-card “to show them what they mean to you.”

6. Priming

Before soliciting donations, **Refuge** shares impactful survivor stories and statistics, preparing donors emotionally and cognitively to give.

The gift table allows you to choose your gift but mostly at the higher level which have the greatest emotional impact.

7. Affect

Emotionally charged testimonials and narratives are featured, fostering empathy and a deeper connection to the cause.

See the reference to Mother's Day *below*. The link between your 'mother' and the 'gift of freedom to another woman'.

8. Commitment

Supporters can choose to make a one time gift. But there are prominent options for monthly giving displayed, encouraging donors to commit to ongoing support:

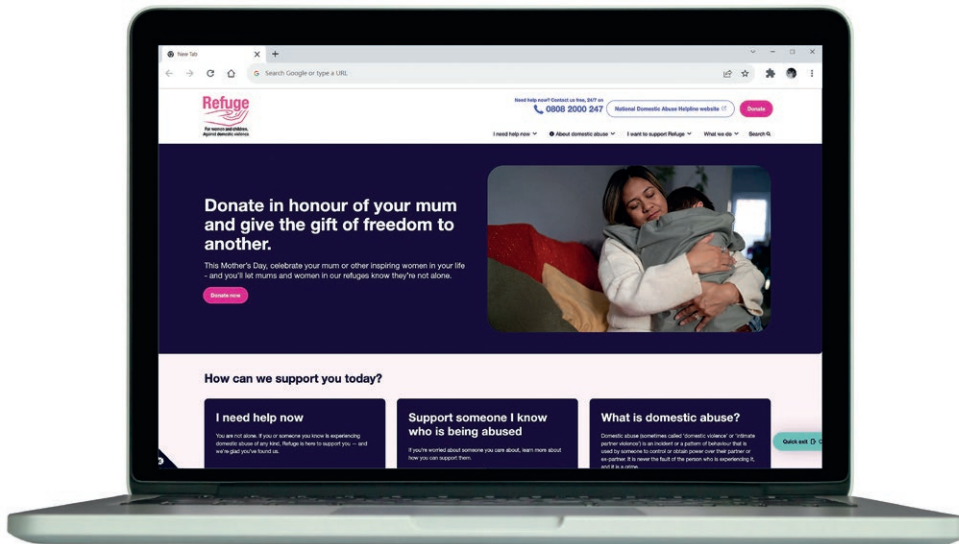
"Your £5 a month could help provide ongoing emotional support for a child who has witnessed or experienced domestic abuse."

This fosters a sense of responsibility and long-term involvement.

9. Ego

Donors are invited to join **Refuge**'s community, aligning their contributions with personal values and identity, enhancing self-esteem through charitable actions. The excellent Mother's Day appeal on this page also signals this ability to enhance your own standing in the eyes of someone you love.

By integrating these behavioural science principles, **Refuge**'s donation page effectively engages potential donors, encouraging meaningful and sustained support for their mission.



Want to play ‘spot the behavioural design cue?’:

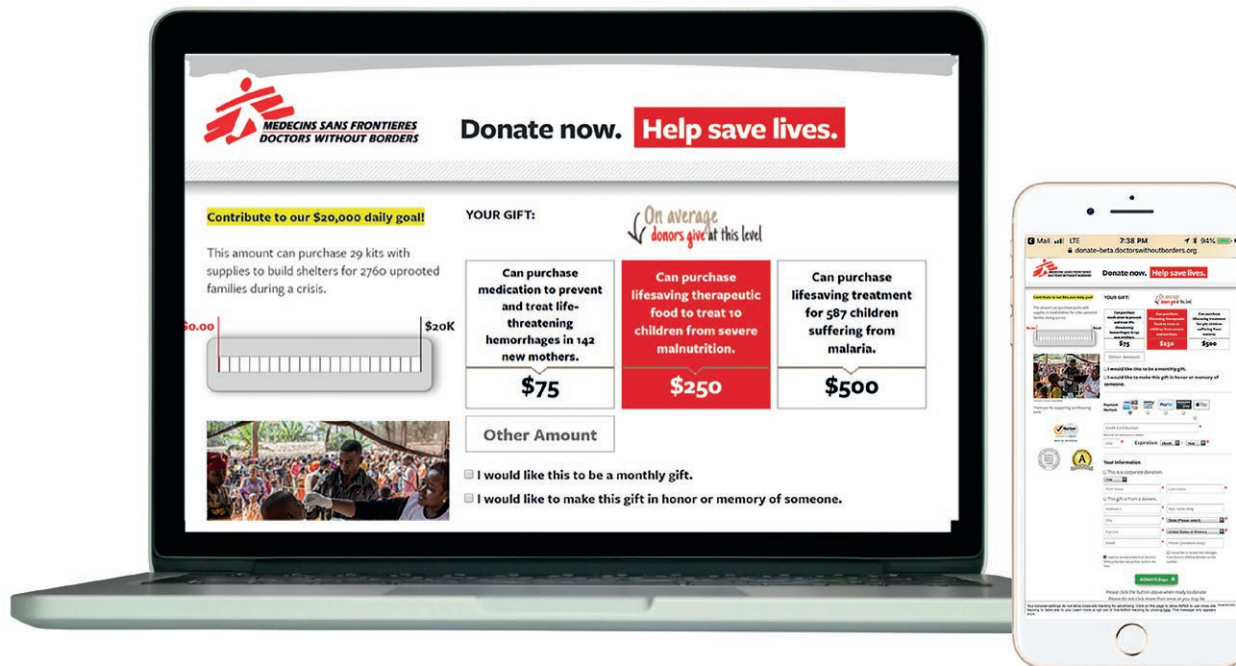
Doctors Without Borders

Here’s a page with both desktop and mobile screenshots that was developed by an **mc consulting** associate Thomas Kurmann.

After a number of tests he embedded different cues incorporating eight heuristics. **Can you spot them?**

Turn the page upside down to see the answer.

(By the way, this format improved income by increasing gift level; but with fewer donors.)



Did you spot them?

- Normalisation: ‘most donors...’
- Centre Stage Effect: \$250 in the middle
- Progress: bars to show others are giving and overall target
- Urgency: daily target
- Salience: impact of each gift level
- Visual Fluency: MSF colour on logo, call-to-action and key suggested gift
- Clear CTA: ‘Help Save Lives’
- Agency: Other amount: ‘my choice of gift’