

Donor Decision Drivers

From First Click to Committed Supporter



Decision Science in Sequence

If you raise money online, you can design a donor journey using a sequence of behavioural heuristics that align with how people actually make decisions.

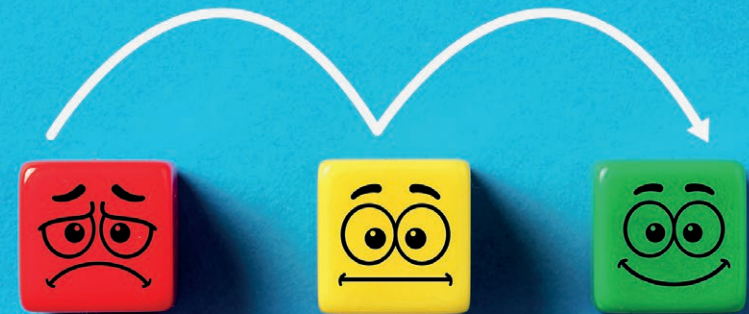
Note that this is a general sequence and you may not want to use all the steps nor in exactly this order. As ever the secret is to test what works best for you target market.

However, the suggested step-by-step sequence on the following page (from a first donation to long-term loyalty) uses well-evidenced heuristics, along with examples of how to apply each in an online environment.

We've used sequences like this in our work with **Doctors Without Borders USA**, **Greenpeace Nordics** and **Greenpeace Mexico**, **Edinburgh Zoo** and **Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery**.

You can find out more about how to apply these heuristics by studying the cards in the **Donor Decision Deck**.

Here are our top ten.





1. Foot In The Door

DESCRIPTION: People who agree to an initial small action are more likely to agree to a larger one later provided there is a link.

TACTIC:

- Start with a **small donation ask**, petition signature, or quiz. Make it super easy to do and show it adds value.
- Follow up with a thank-you and a **'next step' invitation** (e.g. move to monthly donation or share on social).



3. Self and Status

DESCRIPTION: People behave in ways that align with identities they've adopted. This identity can be by culture, gender, affiliation etc. Make a tribe.

TACTIC:

- Call supporters names which offer status and sense of identity e.g. **'planet protectors'**, **'Gift Aiders'**, or **'conservation champions'**.
- Include phrases like "As a [identity e.g. mother, citizen of X...], you know how important..." be sure to use an identity that makes sense.



2. Endowment Effect

DESCRIPTION: We value things more highly and are more inclined to hold onto them when we feel a sense of ownership over them.

TACTIC:

- Use affirmations like **"You've already helped X happen"** in email updates. Send photos of the hospice being built or the rehearsal for the panto they funded.
- Create **personal dashboards** showing individual impact over time. Remind them of how long they have been supporters and how important that longevity is.



4. Social Proof

DESCRIPTION: We're more likely to act (or continue acting) when we know others like us are doing the same. Be sure to match the – 'like us.'

TACTIC:

- Share stories of **other supporters' impact** ("Maria in Leeds gave monthly for a year and funded 3 surgeries.")
- Highlight how many others are supporting: **"Join 14,521 monthly givers who have committed this month."** [We like to feel part of a growing movement.]



5. Commitment and Consistency

DESCRIPTION: People prefer to behave in ways that are consistent with their previous actions. It fits with their sense of self.

TACTIC:

- Remind them of their past actions: “You’ve supported us since 2022. Will you renew your commitment?” Ask them to make public commitments, e.g. post on Facebook.
- Use anniversary emails and **year-in-review infographics**. Use donor calls or random emails to say thanks. [Don’t ask for money!]



7. Reciprocity

DESCRIPTION: When someone does something for us, we feel a social obligation to give back. Begin by giving something.

TACTIC:

- Offer **unexpected value**: e.g. a gift ‘Our free guide to safeguard your child online’, or a personal webinar invite. Distinguish **warm glow** (emotional rewards) and **practical** (useful resources) **reciprocity**.
- Personalisation matters: “We made this for you, Bernard...” Be sure to send greetings at appropriate cultural times: Xmas, Diwali, Eid, etc.



6. Status Quo/Sunk Cost (used ethically)

DESCRIPTION: People tend to continue behaviour they’ve adopted including supporting something they’ve already invested time/money in.

TACTIC:

- Acknowledge past support: “Your previous donations made phase x possible. Will you help finish the job?”
- Frame renewals as “**protecting what you’ve already built**”. You can also invoke the potential for loss “the drama classes for young people could disappear after the local authority cut.”



8. Peak-End Rule

DESCRIPTION: People judge experiences largely based on the most emotionally intense moment (the peak) and the end.

TACTIC:

- Design **emotionally impactful stories** in the middle of a journey (e.g. second or third update).
- End **donor cycles** with a feel-good story evoking a positive emotion, or send an exciting ‘what’s next?’ invitation. See the **=mc consulting** *handout on the emotion wheel*.



9. Default Effect

DESCRIPTION: People tend to go with default options- a limited choice set that reduces the mental effort involved to decide.

TACTIC:

- Set **monthly donation as the default** choice and make it salient with colour or image. But be sure to offer the choice to alter to one time. People like agency.
- Pre-select options in donation forms e.g., '£10/month' pre-ticked or highlighted in some way, perhaps using your brand colour.



10. Scarcity

DESCRIPTION: We value opportunities more when they seem limited or there is the possibility we might miss out.

TACTIC:

- Run **time-limited campaigns** ("Only 3 days left to match your donation!"). Don't be afraid to send follow ups: only 24 hours, the last 60 minutes.
- Use **goal thermometers** and countdowns to show momentum. Be sure to start them when you are over 50% towards the target. [Break the target down if needed — phase one target.]

Integrity Alert

These tools are powerful and should be used to empower supporters, not manipulate them. Be transparent about defaults and time limits.



Sample Supporter Journey Using These Heuristics

Below is a sample donor journey mapping the stages, the heuristics involved, a tactic that employs the heuristic and the emotional goal the tactic is designed to generate. The general example is for a wildlife cause.

Stage	Heuristic(s)	Example Tactic	Emotional Goal
Onboarding	Foot-in-the-door + Endowment	Low-barrier ask: “Will you sign the petition to save X? And if you can donate.” → dashboard showing impact	<i>Ease, Curiosity, Satisfaction</i>
First Thank You	Identity + Reciprocity	“You’re now a Wildlife Guardian” + personalised thank-you	<i>Pride, Belonging, Recognition</i>
First Follow-Up	Social Proof + Consistency	“Good news our petition has reached 250,000 signatories. Join 12,000 others who gave again last month.”	<i>Reassurance, Inclusion, Validation</i>
Month 3	Peak-End + Endowment	Powerful mid-journey story + reminder of what donor enabled: ““Congratulations the illegal trade in X has halved in 12 months.”	<i>Gratitude, Joy, Emotional Investment</i>
Month 6	Commitment + Sunk Cost	“You’ve helped for 6 months—can we count on you again?”	<i>Commitment, Loyalty, Sense of Progress</i>
Renewal Ask	Default Bias + Social Norms	Pre-selected renewal option with “most Guardians do...”	<i>Trust, Ease, Momentum</i>
Year-End	Scarcity + Reciprocity	“Final hours to match your donation” + thank-you report	<i>Urgency, Importance, Gratitude</i>