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The Web rises as a tool for charities

James Turner

If you get up Christmas morning after having had a Scrooge-like awakening, and suddenly feel a need to become a philanthropist, you can either have a local kid run out and buy a goose for the needy, or surf the Web and find a few worthy causes.

Most well-known charities now maintain Web sites. Many, such as those run by Greenpeace and the American Red Cross, will take credit-card donations online.

But a growing number of Web sites are taking a different approach, either "aggregating" a number of charities under one umbrella or promising to make a charitable donation after you buy a product online.

Charitywave.com is an example of a charity aggregator. Donors begin by registering and depositing money (a \$5 minimum) into their account via a credit card. They can then make donations at any time to charities listed on the site, including such diverse organizations as the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, the National Wildlife Federation, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

The service is free, all of the money goes directly to charity, and the site absorbs credit-card transaction fees. The site also provides easy links to get further information about specific charities.

An example of the second type of site is www.4charity.com. These sites take advantage of the fact that when a Web site links you to a retailer, they frequently get a fee if you buy something. Sites like 4charity argue that since the price of any product you buy doesn't change, you might as well link through them and have that kickback donated to a favorite charity.

Still, be sure to determine how much of the fee actually goes to charity. For example, 4charity.com passes all of its kickbacks from online purchases to charity. But iGive.com only passes along half.

Even if a site donates all of its kickbacks, you may still want to shop around for the one that has the best arrangement with its retailers. For example, 4charity.com gets a 12.5 percent cut of purchases made at eToys. But charitymall.com, which also passes 100 percent of its fees on to charity, only gets 5 percent. According to Robin Kaplan of CharityMall, the disparity results from different affiliate agreements or special promotional rates.

Some sites like CharityMall also require you to take extra steps during a purchase, such as using a special e-mail address with the retailer. Ms. Kaplan points out that CharityMall does this to ensure that retailers rebate the proper amounts to the charities.

Another twist on the theme of leveraging the power of the Internet for charity is thehungersite.com. This site allows you to help the hungry with a simple click of the mouse.

A group of sponsor companies agreed to give half a cent each to the United Nations World Food Program when you view a Web page with their banner ads on it.

On the day I visited, there were 12 small ads on the page, and the total amount they contributed for my visit was enough to buy three cups of rice.

It may sound like small potatoes, but the site statistics showed that on the previous day, clicks like mine had purchased 123,000 pounds of food. The site also has a good deal of information on world hunger and statistics on how the money is raised and distributed. The sponsors pledge to make a donation for each day

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you visit the site.

If you become suspicious of a charity or just want to check one out before donating, there are sites to help you. The Better Business Bureau maintains a site aimed at charities (www.bbb.org/about/pas.html). The listings are somewhat sparse.

The National Charities Information Bureau also has a more complete list of charities at www.give.org, but it will cost you \$9.95 to find out more than a simple pass/fail to their list of standards for a given charity.

A free site called guidestar.org goes one step further, providing information on more than 620,000 different charitable organizations.

The site's well-designed search engine will even let you find charities that meet your interests, such as the 27 Celtic culture organizations it found on a sample search.

The site also offers detailed financial data on 100,000 of the organizations, and online profiles of about 6,000, but all listings include basic information including the date that the charity filed with the IRS.

The one type of online giving that makes no sense is to give through a site that charges a fee to pass on the donation. You'd be much better served to contact the charity directly.

*James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web user.

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