

FUNDRAISING IS TRANSFORMATIVE

Fundraising to Change Reality

Is fundraising scary?

I want to start with a little experiment... Let's take a minute and try to imagine something that scares us, to think about the things that frighten us the most. I am pretty sure that some of us have already started making a list with snakes, spiders, public speaking, dining with in-laws, or much more... But maybe the idea of fundraising is the thing that connects us all. The mere thought of asking someone for money or being invited to give money is terrifying for most people.

My story in fundraising

I started dealing with fundraising and nonprofit causes at the age of twenty, organizing cultural initiatives during my university years. At that time, the division of tasks among us university students was very simple: those studying Humanities and Philosophy thought about the meeting, presented it, asked questions and made interventions, in other words, they did all the "important" work. While those like me who studied Economics and Commerce sought sponsors to support the costs of the initiative. I must say that I did not dislike it at all, so I continued even after university and, as you can imagine, in my professional life, I have always been involved in finding money for causes and things that I truly cared about. Because at the base of every good cause I have encountered in my life, there has ALWAYS been the issue of money and how to find the funds to finance it. After all, let's be honest... if there is no money, there is very little that can be done, right?!

Fundraising: a means, not an end

And yet, if for some fundraising or being invited to give money can sometimes seem terrifying, I believe it is a powerful means to change reality, to transform society. I believe that fundraising is transformative. It is the means, not the end, through which nonprofits pursue their missions and create an impact in the world. So today I propose a brief journey that unfolds over three key concepts: Consumption, Contribution, and Community. It is through the analysis of these three concepts that we will understand together why fundraising is transformative.

Consumption born from comparison

Observe, obtain, conform Let's start with the word Consumption. Currently, we consume twice as many material goods as we did fifty years ago. According to a study from a few years ago, there are about 300,000 objects in an

average American home, and according to some estimates (like Annie Leonard's), 99% of the things we buy are thrown away within six months.

A society that, borrowing Bauman's words, can be defined as "liquid-modern."

But what drives this rush to consume? Comparison.

"If you have that object, maybe I should have it too," and if we both have it, "doesn't it become a 'standard' that we should all have?"

This leads to a mindset that could be defined as follows: "Observe and obtain." Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein explain it well. They studied how social influences operate on human behavior and argue that humans are easily nudged by other humans. The main reason? Most people like to be conformists. Why? We are constantly nagged by the desire not to fall into the disapproval of others, and our judgment changes under the constant pressures of our peer group.

But the (in my opinion, astonishing) thing that the two authors highlighted is that some research conducted through functional neuroimaging techniques confirms that the adoption of a conformist position by humans largely depends on observing reality in conformity with the vision of others. In other words, it seems that people see things exactly the way they are seen by their peers. So... not only do we observe what others have and desire to obtain it as well, "Observe and obtain" as we said earlier, but we go further, we conform not only in customs but also in thought.

A few years ago, the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology published the results of an experimental study on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, demonstrating a causal relationship between the time spent on social networks and a decline in psycho-physical well-being. In practice, it emerged that excessive use of multimedia platforms increases the risk of loneliness and depression.

As the experts conclude: "It is ironic, but perhaps not surprising, that reducing the use of social media, which promised to help us connect more with others, actually helps people feel less lonely and depressed."

Now, it is evident that the fault of this is not attributable to social networks per se, but rather to the way they are used. But let's realize when we scroll through dozens of images of our friends who seem to be living beautiful and incredible lives, the feeling we experience is: "Maybe I don't have everything I should have, as they do." The nonprofit organization The Self Storage Association has calculated that one in ten Americans rents a storage unit to put "extra" things, which means we are well beyond the 300,000 objects that enter an

average American home. The United States has more than 50,000 storage facilities, more than five times the number of Starbucks. Currently, there are about 3 square meters of space for every man, woman, and child. It is clear: we have more things, so we need to buy more storage space. Not to mention those who are fortunate enough to earn a lot and can buy another house, in another place, where they spend only a few months a year, if not just a few weeks, but where they can stuff another 300,000 objects. Rich and happy? We have fallen into this loop: compare and consume, compare and consume, compare and consume, buying, or with the desire to buy, anything that passes under our eyes.

And yet this does not make us happier. How come? Ambrose Bierce defined happiness as "the pleasant sensation that comes from the observation of others' misery." But is our happiness dependent on comparison with others?

If all those things we keep buying, driven by the desire to assert ourselves, really made us happier, why do we get rid of them after just a few months? Shouldn't they become indispensable goods to our happiness?

In 2006, the journal *Science* published an article titled: "Would you be happier if you were richer?"

The authors of the research suggest that the widespread idea that a high income corresponds to a higher level of happiness is an illusion. A higher income leads to a greater level of satisfaction, yes, but not happiness.

Studies have shown that income increases have only a transient effect on happiness, and more importantly, when evaluating the impact that a single factor has on their well-being, people tend to overestimate its importance and the future happiness it might bring.

For example: individuals who experience a significant shock (such as the onset of a disability or winning the lottery) focus all their attention on that particular event, at least initially, but over time their attention returns to the concerns of daily life.

Researchers have shown that wealthier people spend less time on activities they enjoy, probably those that most contribute to their happiness, and more time on activities that cause higher levels of stress and anxiety.

You might argue that achieving goals is often accompanied by high tension, which is true. But once we achieve our goals, what increases is our satisfaction, not our happiness.

As Kahneman and Schkade put it: "Nothing in life is as important as what you think about while you're thinking about it."

In light of these studies, it appears astounding that packaging and systematically selling happiness is a business estimated to be worth more than

ten billion dollars annually. In her book, "America the Anxious: How the Pursuit of Happiness is Creating a Nation of Nervous Wrecks," Ruth Whippmann shows that Americans are spending a fortune seeking happiness and are becoming less happy because of this pursuit. As Christina Bernt explains: "Happiness is an evolutionary stimulus, a drive to do more and better, without which we would remain in the same place and eventually starve. The downside of this evolutionary impulse, however, is that while happiness can be relatively easy to achieve, the obsessive pursuit of it soon turns into addiction. [...] the desire to be happy at all costs – an increasingly widespread and sometimes unstoppable aspiration in our society – is just a consequence of well-being." Let me share an example from a few years ago.

I was at Columbia University for my usual fundraising lecture series and wanted to fully experience consumerism. It was the day the new iPhone was released, and I decided to stand in line to understand what it feels like to wait for hours, if not a day, to be the first to have a new iPhone model.

Mind you: a phone that could be bought in a few minutes just a few days later. I waited in line for almost two hours, chatted with my fellow adventurers, and as soon as I finally bought the new iPhone, the saleswoman said something that caught me off guard: "So today is really a big day for you! You have a new phone! Aren't you excited?" And I could only respond, "Yes, I am," mostly to avoid discouraging her. I wasn't excited at all; it was like my old phone, just newer and with a few more features.

Emotions, decisions, consumption, and happiness

In his book, "The Happiness Hypothesis," Jonathan Haidt provides an eloquent example of our emotions and our mind and leaves us with this metaphor.

"Our emotions are like an elephant, and our mind is like a rider trying to explain the elephant's presence in our lives. The elephant is so cumbersome that it can't really be avoided, and our mind can only rationalize these emotions, justifying them."

We have fallen into a trap where the emotions we experience when observing a new watch, a nicer car, or the lives of those around us become something we "absolutely need" and "can't live without."

It happens to me, who knows these mechanisms and uses them for fundraising, and it happens to my children, who are much less trained than I am to resist the impulse to buy.

For example, a few months ago, my youngest daughter said, "Dad, I need a new phone." Notice that she didn't say, "I want a new phone"; no, she said, "I

need." In 2017, an Italian study attempted to monetize the value of Italians' feelings and emotions, demonstrating how often the purchase of material goods conveys and triggers human emotions (72%). While only 22% of emotions are conveyed by experiences, such as dining out or traveling.

In other words, never before have so much money been spent trying to capture our attention.

To achieve what Alberto Contri has masterfully defined as "The Era of Constant Partial Attention." And even at this very moment, each of us has a small object in our pocket ready to capture our attention and, possibly, make us buy something in the next few minutes or when we have the time.

We seek to achieve happiness through rampant consumption, without realizing that this is not the right path to take. And since we live in this upside-down era, wisdom no longer comes from philosophers but can come from various people. For example, actor Jim Carrey says, "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."

The Happiness Paradox

Richard Easterlin described this well in 1974 with his "Happiness Paradox," also known as the "Satisfaction Curve." It shows that when moving in terms of wealth from "survival" to "enough," the happiness curve rises. And it seems obvious to me: when we are sure that we will have food to eat in the evening, a roof over our heads, and that we can face tomorrow at least economically regardless of what may happen, we start to feel more serene, we are more serene.

So when we reach the "enough" point (which is obviously subjective), realization and happiness grow. But beyond that point, something interesting happens... if we continue to consume, we reach a point of over-consumption, the point of "hyper-consumption," and happiness begins to decline, and our sense of realization plummets.

Research calculates that Americans spend 1.2 trillion dollars a year on non-essential goods.

In Italy, according to some estimates, 17.3 billion euros were spent on luxury goods in 2015. A recent study also showed that the luxury goods market increased by +6% in 2018, reaching a turnover of 260 billion euros, with a trend of continuous growth that is expected to reach 320-365 billion euros by 2025. We spend enormous sums of money on things that exceed the "enough" point for many of us, things that do not increase our happiness, but we persist in buying and consuming them! Why is that? With the rise of utilitarian doctrine

within all areas of social life, the concept of happiness was progressively replaced by that of utility. Judgments about happiness began to be based solely on the calculation of one's utility, understood as the property of the relationship between things and people.

But are we really sure that happiness and utility are the same thing? Unlike utility, happiness is the property of the relationship between people. Although there is no single definition of happiness valid for every individual, it is sought by most people as a condition of absolute well-being.

Attention, though: one can be alone and at the same time satisfied with their life, but this is not enough to be happy. At least two people are needed to "consume" happiness. And it is through reciprocal and free giving that relationships flourish, making it possible to achieve happiness.

As Stefano Zamagni wrote: "Goods not shared are always paths to unhappiness. Money tightly held actually impoverishes its possessor because it strips them of the ability to give. The miser, by definition, cannot give and thus cannot be happy. They can give gifts, they can engage in philanthropic practices if it serves them instrumentally to increase their possessions."

Here emerges the second concept of our story, the word Donation.

DONATION

We are made to give

I have good news for us. And the good news is that "we are made to give." And it's not just theory; it has been scientifically proven. Our DNA is coded to cooperate because it is through cooperation and giving that we manage to survive. A study conducted in 2006 demonstrated that when we give, neural reactions occur: the mesolimbic pathway is activated, which is responsible for the release of dopamine, and this neurotransmitter regulates the brain's happiness and pleasure center.

We were "created" for this, even if we constantly try to derive pleasure from something else.

So I suggest that instead of continuing to hyper-consume and making the curve plummet, we introduce the concept of "giving" and stop the downward arc that leads to emptiness, to experience a new – and even greater – sense of fulfillment.

Obviously, we can choose whether to be part of the group that experiences the pleasure of giving (and become givers ourselves) or belong to the category of consumers.

For example, in 2008, Harvard Business School, in the context of a larger study, conducted an experiment: participants were given a sum of money and asked to choose whether to spend it on themselves or on someone else.

Those who decided to give the money to someone in need or to a nonprofit organization reported an increase in their sense of satisfaction and greater happiness. And this, regardless of the amount of money available.

As researchers explain: "The activities people choose to engage in can indicate a promising path to lasting happiness. With this premise, our work demonstrates that how people choose to spend their money is as important as the amount of money they have available."

Therefore, to those who believe that giving is useless because "you can't really make a difference with the few dollars you give," we should remind them that the reason for giving is not just the impact achieved with the money given for that specific cause, but the joy that comes from that gesture.

As a beautiful verse says: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

The real issue is who we choose to be and which path we decide to take.

If we belong to the category of non-givers, we will be non-givers, but if we choose to give, this choice will open up better scenarios because helping others helps us live longer.

Because when we contribute with our time or talent to help someone, we are telling them that they matter, and this has incredible effects on our health.

One of the five factors that help alleviate depression is "giving." Creativity, resilience, health, and even longevity can be improved or be a byproduct of deciding to contribute to others' lives, and this is also supported by Dr. Stephen Post of Stony Brook University School of Medicine in New York: "You are happier and healthier when you give your contribution, and the happier you are, the more you are driven to give your contribution."

So although donation requests may seem to be only about money, the real goal is to make change happen. I work with many young fundraisers, and the best of them seek purpose, an objective in life. I always give them a suggestion: to help find your purpose, look back, understand the challenges you have overcome in life, and help someone else facing the same problem.

This makes us part of an extraordinary story, the story of a community of givers before even being fundraisers. And so we come to the last part.

COMMUNITY

A community that transforms

Here we are at the last concept of our story: the word Community. As a fundraiser stated during the 2nd National Census of Italian Fundraisers that I conducted in 2019: "Fundraising allows you to change people's lives for the better by improving their quality of life. This is why I like to think of the fundraiser as a happiness intermediary. It's like a little man with two outstretched hands: one holding the donor's hand and the other holding the beneficiary's hand, and he connects them (even if not directly), to realize the dreams of both."

We understand that if this is true, the "terrifying" work of the fundraiser is not what people think it is but serves first and foremost to make people "happier."

Because helping organizations by donating, being part of the fundraising team, is not just about money; it's about meaning. When I talk about fundraising to people who know little or nothing about it, often the first image that comes to mind is me, or any fundraiser, standing in front of someone else trying to convince them to give money.

Values and relationships But it's not about convincing someone to give; it's about making connections, about "teaching others the joy of giving"!! Fundraising doesn't mean convincing people that giving is right; it means helping people put their altruistic intentions into action.

Fundraising is not direct sales, but it's standing beside someone, understanding the values that drive that person to give, channeling them into a decision, and then, together, imagining a higher purpose. In practice: fundraising means standing on the same side as the donor, discussing and working together. We begin to realize that fundraising doesn't mean "transaction" but "transformation," right...?

As Jackson Browne says: "Remember that the happiest people are not those who have the most, but those who give the most."

By giving, you transform your life and that of others. So who is a fundraiser if not an important intermediary who creates meaningful connections between people, and in doing so, builds happiness, transforming donors' lives?! So I suggest three small practices to make your life as a fundraiser, and that of your donors, more fulfilling:

1. Your mission is worthy of support! If you are not the first to believe in it, no one else will.
2. People give, and even a lot of money, but only if you ask them. Obviously, not everyone, but many people do, provided they are asked. You have to ask!

3. Fundraising campaigns fail not for lack of donors (or money), but for lack of fundraisers. So I challenge you with these three things:
4. Give (time, money, skills) instead of consuming
5. Be caring instead of critical (we receive enough criticism every day already);
6. Be curious and choose celebration instead of comparison.

Because if we do this as a community, if we are the first to start doing it, only then will we cultivate an unlimited community of people who give. Thank you.