

Christian TV's All-Time Worst Fundraising Gimmicks

Let's stop the hypnotism, the guilt manipulation and the high-pressure gimmicks. It's time to reclaim our lost credibility.

Normally I'd rather go to the dentist for a root canal than watch a telethon. But while channel surfing a few nights ago I tuned into PBS and discovered that Aretha Franklin, the legendary Queen of Soul, was hosting a fundraiser for the network. Seated at a piano, she was offering a 5-CD collection of classic rhythm and blues hits in exchange for a donation to public television.

It was simple. There were no gimmicks, no games and no strings attached in Aretha's offer. If you gave the suggested gift, she explained, PBS would mail you a big slice of American pop culture—including songs by Gladys Knight and the Pips, Smokey Robinson, the Four Tops, Al Green and Aretha herself, singing her classic "Respect."

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My respect for

PBS was still intact when the telethon ended, thanks to this low-key, no-pressure approach to fundraising. I can't say that for some Christian networks, which have shamelessly extorted money from viewers over the years using heavy-handed guilt manipulation, hypnotic control and bizarre Scripture-twisting.

During the PBS telethon I wondered why Christian networks couldn't simply offer music, books or other premiums instead of resorting to the typical arm-twisting and tear-jerking that we've come to expect. We need an overhaul in this area. Somebody needs to lead the way in pioneering a new style of on-air fundraising that doesn't treat people like brainless zombies.

Here are five of my least favorite fundraising tactics. I wish all of them could be banned from the airwaves.

Gimmick #1: The magic Bible verse. You know the drill. The evangelist quotes Psalm 37:37 and then announces that if you will send \$ ("No more, no less!") God will unleash all the blessings of King David upon you. (Hint: The phones seem to ring more frequently when the number seven is included in the Bible reference.)

Gimmick #2:
The urgent, time-is-running-out plea. Before the preacher asks you to reach for your wallet, dramatic

music is piped in. Then “Reverend Cheatem” talks about how the crippled man waited by the pool of Bethesda, hoping that the angel would trouble the waters so he could be healed. “God is troubling the waters right now, my dear friend,” the preacher says with his eyes closed. “Go to the phones now, before it is too late. Only those who give in this holy, anointed moment will receive a supernatural blessing in return.”

Gimmick #3:

The memorialized gift.

One popular evangelist announced on-air that she needed thousands of dollars to build a prayer room. She promised that those who funded this noble effort would receive recognition with special brass nameplates that would be mounted on the wall of the facility. The implication was that people could buy prayer coverage, sort of like a spiritual insurance policy. (I’m not surprised—since this woman offered her loyal followers the status of “spiritual son” or “spiritual daughter” if they paid a \$1,000 annual fee.)

Gimmick #4: The

debt-breaking anointing.

One preacher who specializes in telethons has raised millions by telling audiences that they are just one donation away from eliminating all red ink. All they have to do is give a sacrificial gift (usually four figures) to the TV network in the next few minutes. If they do this, God will

wipe out their debts, no questions asked. No lifestyle changes necessary. (This technique was especially popular before the mortgage crisis.)

Gimmick #5:

The Day of Atonement offering. This particularly odd strategy has been popular in the last couple of years, especially among gullible Christians who believe God blesses anything and everything that has the word “Israel” attached to it. The preacher announces that if you write a check to their network, and wave it in the air before you mail it (preferably while wearing a Jewish prayer shawl), God will forgive your sins, restore your health, bring back your wayward children, provide angelic protection and bless you with more than a dozen other special favors.

I still don't know what is more outrageous: That programmers allow such insanity on Christian television, or that gullible Christians fall for it year after year. Hopefully, emerging leaders in the religious broadcasting industry will restore our lost credibility by insisting on integrity, authenticity and good taste.

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