



# Donation Boxes in Museums

On-site donations can play an important role in a museum's overall fundraising strategy for two principal reasons. First, the very presence of a donation box reinforces the charitable nature of the museum. Secondly, the income itself (with Gift Aid) can be significant, whether unrestricted or allocated to a specific project.

There are definitely some dos and don'ts to understand if you want to get the best results. Donation boxes are an investment - they may require outlay of around £700 each, but managed well, can return that investment over and over again.

advice on the use of donations boxes, we hope it will help you get the most out of this form of fundraising.

We'd like to thank the 90 respondents to the AIM survey and those who have agreed to be quoted within this paper.

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This short paper, prepared for AIM by Development Partners (DP), reflects on the results of a survey of AIM members in summer 2014, along with other people's research and DP's experience of working with museums, large and small, across the UK. By giving practical

## Box Design

Whether you are installing donation boxes for the first time or reviewing existing arrangements, the first consideration is the type and design of a donation box. Many respondents to our survey raised this issue, questioning whether a box tailored to the theme of the museum, such as a whisky barrel in a distillery museum, would result in greater donations than a clear, Perspex box, or whether child-friendly, interactive boxes are more successful.

The answer is clear: professionally presented, transparent, Perspex boxes on plinths are the best way to secure the greatest donation amounts.

This is for a number of reasons:

- Research into the psychology of giving indicates that people are less likely to put money into ‘a black hole’. They want to see where their money is going.
- Research shows that visitors’ donations are greatly affected by the perceived donation behaviour of previous visitors. Therefore, it is important that previous donations can be seen clearly, as this encourages giving. This is discussed in more detail in the section below.
- Interactive donation boxes, specifically those aimed at children, can result in a large number of donations. However, these are usually in the form of small change. As these coins are nearly always provided by accompanying adults, those adults may be less likely to make an additional, more valuable donation because they feel they have already given. Also, this sort of device can trivialise the serious business of asking for charitable support of your organisation.

- If you've already got a whizzy interactive donation device that you don't want to lose because it's a popular exhibit, move it away from the key donation box areas and remove any signage relating to donations. This then becomes a paid-for interactive exhibit, rather than part of your fundraising infrastructure.

Donation boxes should be heavy enough to be secure, but possible to move. This enables you to change the location of the box if you have a temporary exhibition, or if you wish to experiment with the location to increase donations. Small, desk-top donation boxes generally look insecure and should be avoided. They will encourage small coin donations.

Sheffield Museums Trust (SMT) and London Transport Museum (LTM) provide good evidence to support these points. Over the past few years, both organisations have increased the number of boxes they have available on their premises. For SMT (a non-charging organisation) this has brought about a 2000% increase in donations received through boxes in a decade; LTM (which charges for entry) has quadrupled its donation amounts in a year. Both organisations use the same basic design for the majority of their boxes: simple Perspex cubes on plain plinths. The boxes are placed at the entrances and exits, and, at LTM, outside the cloakrooms.

In addition to these static boxes, both organisations personalise other boxes to support current campaigns or exhibitions. For example, at SMT, objects relevant to a particular appeal have been placed within a donation box to attract attention - a lucky knocking cat proved popular for a recent oriental exhibition.

Update the art work on your boxes used to encourage support for particular projects.

## Box Design *cont.*

LTM also updates the artwork on its boxes as its messages change. Dedicated donation boxes are used to encourage support for particular projects. For example, to encourage donations to its current campaign to restore a B-type bus, an appropriately presented box has been placed next to

the bus to attract adults interested in the project. These project-based donation boxes can be especially useful in paid-for attractions as they may be more attractive to visitors than general donation requests.

## Positioning

It was generally agreed by our survey respondents that donation boxes should be located at entrances and/or exits, in plain view of all visitors, and where footfall is concentrated. People are greatly influenced by the donation patterns of others, so donation boxes should not be discreet, but obvious and clearly marked for all to see.

be presented sideways-on or backing onto the main direction of travel.

As discussed above, boxes can also be positioned near exhibits/objects that help to illustrate a particular appeal. At Cogges Manor Farm, a box positioned near three goats soon achieved the funding needed to buy the animals! One respondent to the survey highlighted how a donation box placed at the end of a free guided-tour outperformed other boxes three times over. If your organisation offers such a visit enhancement, it is vital to ensure that guides (whether paid or volunteer) ask visitors to make a donation.

A donation box should be emptied regularly, but never entirely - the money visible in the box can have an encouraging effect on donors and has a significant impact on the amount you receive.

In general, Perspex-topped boxes should be positioned against plain, dark backgrounds. This makes the content stand out. Beware putting them amongst other clutter or messages - the donation box needs to be the centre of attention if it is to generate a positive response. They should face principal visitor routes, not

## Management

Once you have decided on the style and position of your donation boxes, attention should turn to the systems required to manage the donations and, in particular, to the amount and value of money visible in boxes at the beginning of each day. A donation box should be emptied regularly, but never entirely - the money visible in the box can have an encouraging effect on donors and has a significant impact on the amount you receive. In field experiments carried out by Professors Martin and Randal, comparisons between empty boxes and those containing a float showed that boxes without a float received up to 50% less in donations than those with a float.<sup>1</sup>

The composition of the float also has an effect on donation behaviour. In the same experiment, Martin and Randal showed how donation amounts are affected by how generous other people are perceived to have been. Comparing three boxes with differing numbers of coins, and small and large currency notes, the box with a large number of coins led to the highest propensity to donate, but generated smaller donations per visitor.

## Management cont.

Every time each donation box is emptied (never less than weekly) the amount received should be recorded. Not only will this allow you to measure the results, and try changes to position and messaging, but you may also be able to claim under the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme (see below) on up to £5,000 of these donations raising an extra £1,250 for your museum.

## Communications

The communications on and around each donation box will have a direct impact on results, and an indirect impact on your wider fundraising success. An important role of the donation box is to draw attention to the fact that your museum is a charity. Messages should reinforce the need for philanthropic support.

Different layers of information are useful, explaining the need and (ideally) what the money will be used for. Most importantly, make it clear that you are asking for donations.

We recommend that you experiment with the text and format of your donation box messages, determining what works best for your organisation. Don't be coy! Here are two examples of text on or around donation boxes:

**Dawlish Museum:** Volunteer-run; adult admission - £2

*This museum is entirely managed by volunteers and runs on a shoestring.*

*Funds are needed to keep the house warm and lit, to produce marketing materials and to care for and display the collections.*

*We aim to keep the admission price as low as possible so that everyone can enjoy the Museum, whatever their circumstances.*

*If you feel you could make an additional donation, you would be*

By contrast, the box with the largest notes resulted in the fewest donations, but the average donation per visitor was the highest.<sup>2</sup> In general, people donate what they see has been donated by previous visitors, so ensure that the contents of your box reflect the donations you would like to receive and that you consider to be most appropriate for your audience.

*helping to secure the museum for future generations.*

*Thank you.*

**Banbury Museum:** Recently transferred from local authority to trust; free admission.

a) Box positioned within temporary exhibition space.

*Your donation today will enable us to bring the next new exhibition to Banbury. Thank you.*

*Banbury Museum is a charity. Please use a gift aid envelope if you are a UK tax payer and make your donation worth 25% more to the Museum.*

b) Box positioned at entrance to Museum.

*Banbury Museum is free for all to visit and relies on the support of those who enjoy and treasure its galleries, collections and activities.*

*Please make a donation today. Thank you.*

*Banbury Museum is a charity. Please use a gift aid envelope if you are a UK tax payer and make your donation worth 25% more to the Museum.*

It is of course useful to collect donations in Gift Aid envelopes, but we suggest prioritising getting the donation in the first place and being prepared to forego the Gift Aid if the donor is going to be put off by form-filling.

Never forget to say 'thank you'.

"The communications on and around each donation box will have a direct impact on results, and an indirect impact on your wider fundraising success"



## Suggested Donations

Evidence from survey respondents shows that the inclusion of a suggested donation amount can increase total donation amounts: in one of SMT's sites including a donation amount increased donations threefold. However, this is really only appropriate for free-admission museums.

Setting the suggested donation level can be difficult. Too low a price can devalue the museum visit, whilst too high a level may put people off donating at all. Be prepared to try different amounts, thinking about the make-up of your audience. For example, tourists may be prepared to donate more than locals – so you could try increasing the suggested donation level in high season. It could well be

worth the small cost increase in printing new signage.

Amongst the respondents to our survey, only 27% suggest a donation level. This amount varies between £2 and £5. The Ashmolean suggests a donation of £4 (special exhibitions are subject to charge but the main museum is free admission); the British Museum £3. We are not aware of the results of tests to increase these amounts to figures closer to an equivalent charged-admission ticket price, such as at The Met in New York, where the suggested donation is US\$25 and the average given is US\$11 per visitor.

Never forget to say

'Thank You'

## Donation Box Results

There are so many variables when it comes to determining and comparing the results of donation box fundraising that it is difficult to propose a figure, or even a range, that museums should be seeking to achieve. In response to the question 'what is your average donation per visitor' survey results ranged from less than 1p to £2, with the majority claiming 50p or less.

Organisations that have experimented with the position and communications around their donation boxes and measured performance were more likely to be reaping the higher returns than those who are passive.

## Gift Aid and Gift Aid Small Donation Scheme

All museums and heritage organisations with charitable status should be aware of the importance of claiming Gift Aid on donations, as doing so can increase the amount you receive by 25%. Ideally, people giving to donation boxes should be asked to complete a Gift Aid form, but often this is not possible. It is important that this method of giving is made as easy as possible – insisting on Gift Aid details can stop people making a spur-of-the-moment gift.

In 2013 HMRC introduced the Gift Aid Small Donation Scheme ('GASDS'), which allows charities to claim a Gift Aid top-up payment on small cash donations (under £20), on a total of up to £5,000. This can result in a useful additional £1,250.

Full details of the scheme are available on the HMRC website ([hmrc.gov.uk/charities/gasds/](http://hmrc.gov.uk/charities/gasds/)).

It is subject to a few key conditions:

## Gift Aid and Gift Aid Small Donation Scheme *cont.*

- Donations must be made in cash (not cheque, or card), and should not exceed £20 per donor. Recognising that it can be difficult to measure precisely the amount each donor gives, the HMRC states that 'any bank note of £20 or below, and all coins, can be treated as a small donation unless your organisation knows they were made as part of a single donation of over £20.'<sup>3</sup>
- GASDS claims must be matched by claims you have made in the Gift Aid scheme in the same year in a ratio of 1 to 10. Therefore, if you claim Gift Aid donations of £100 in a year, you can only claim on up to £1,000 in the GASDS. As such, it is in your interest to ensure that you continue to collect Gift Aid declarations as frequently as possible, as this has a direct effect on the maximum GASDS you can claim.
- Benefits cannot be given to the donor in return for the donation. For example, you cannot give discounts, goods or free admission (i.e.: in lieu of an admission charge) to a donor.
- Small donations cannot be claimed through both the Gift Aid and GASDS scheme.

To encourage donations received through boxes to be eligible for Gift Aid, you will need to have gift aid envelopes/forms available nearby. Although it can be difficult to keep these stocked and tidy, if used properly they can provide the organisation with a number of benefits in addition to the Gift Aid. SMT, for example, found that around 80% of their completed envelopes provided details of people not previously on their database, increasing their opportunity to communicate with supporters.

80% of their completed envelopes provided details of people not previously on their database

## Volunteer/staff engagement

A number of the larger organisations that responded to the survey highlighted the importance of staff and volunteers encouraging visitors to make a donation.

The Science Museum's new concourse was designed to enable this engagement. Previously, although a number of donation points were available, visitors could easily pass them without interacting with the staff or the donation boxes. There is now a 'beautiful barrier' through which visitors have to enter. This means that staff and volunteers welcome every visitor and can encourage them to donate. In the six months following the introduction of this design, the amount received in donation boxes had increased by 80%.<sup>4</sup>

Many museums would not be able to implement such a scheme; neither would it be appropriate. However, the importance of staff and volunteer engagement stands out as vital to raising donation levels. Staff and volunteers should be able to talk passionately to visitors about the organisation, and to be able to explain why donations are needed.

This message should be consistent with communications on and around the donations boxes. In order to communicate well, staff and volunteers need to understand the underlying economics of the organisation.

## Other on-site donation practices

Only 15% of the respondents to the survey promote any other form of on-site giving. Requesting donations by text or through QR codes is largely confined to the larger organisations, and smaller organisations frequently cite a lack of IT knowledge or small visitor numbers as a reason for not yet exploring electronic donations.

Although these methods currently result in very few donations one respondent commented on the fact that ‘a combination of donation methods, e.g. a sign encouraging text

donations, increases the amount in the collection boxes nearby.’

On-site electronic donations are not expected to perform at the same level as cash donations in the foreseeable future, but offering a menu of giving methods does ensure that everyone has the option to donate in the way they prefer. It also reinforces, again, the charitable status of the organisation.

Make sure messages, written and spoken, are consistent, emphasising that the organisation is a charity.

## One Final Point

Most cash donations secured through donation boxes will be ‘unrestricted’ – meaning that you can use the funds as you see fit for any legitimate charitable expenditure. However, if you link a

donation box to a particular appeal, these funds become ‘restricted’ and must be spent on the project described in the ask.

## Conclusions

- Investment in donation boxes pays off.
- Choose a sturdy box which can be moved.
- Make sure that donations can be seen – a simple, professional, Perspex-topped box is best.
- Empty boxes regularly but always start with a visible float that reflects the donations you want to attract.
- Position boxes in prominent positions, such as entrances/exits, facing the visitor traffic.
- Don’t position a box in a cluttered, visually noisy position – let it be the centre of attention.
- Consider allocating a box to a specific appeal.
- Move interactive/decorative donation boxes away from entrances/exits and remove any donation messages/wording. Consider these paid-for interactives rather than donation boxes.
- Get your message right. Ask for donations but also make sure you explain the need and the purpose. Make sure messages, written and spoken, are consistent, emphasising that the organisation is a charity.
- If your museum is free-admission, consider suggesting an appropriate donation level.



## Conclusions *cont.*

- Experiment with placement, messages and suggested donation amounts. Record results and be prepared to make changes.
- Make it easy for people to Gift Aid, but don't force them. You may lose spur-of-the-moment donations if you complicate the giving process.
- Train staff and volunteers to ask for donations. Make sure they understand the need and purpose for the donations so that they feel comfortable talking about it to visitors.

## References

<sup>1</sup>p233, R Martin, J Randal 'How is donation behavior affected by the donations of others?' Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization 67 (2008)

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, pg 237

<sup>3</sup><http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/charities/gasds/what-counts.htm>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.effectivedesign.org.uk/sites/default/files/9.0.2%20Universal%20Design%20Studio%20%26%20Map.pdf> (accessed 10 September 2014)

## About the Authors

At Development Partners, we provide fundraising consultancy for the museums and heritage sector. We support our clients' needs with tailored research, feasibility studies, fundraising and communication strategies and the implementation of fundraising campaigns. For more than 12 years, we have provided consultancy to over 80 charitable organisations, unlocking funding for capital projects and revenue streams

that enable our clients to flourish. For further information, please visit our website at:

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