When corporations crowd-source giving, you vote and charities win

By John Kelly
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If you'd like to help So Others Might Eat, a charity that supplies food, clothing and health care to the poor and homeless in our area, I hope you will go to www.womenofworth.com, click on the entry for a Falls Church bassoonist named Lynn Gaubatz and then vote for her. If Lynn receives more votes than the other Women of Worth, SOME will get $25,000 from L'Oreal Paris, the cosmetics company sponsoring the contest.

L'Oreal has already donated $5,000 in Lynn's name, as it has for the other nine contestants, who range from an 18-year-old in Los Angeles who donates DVDs to children's hospitals to a 90-year-old New Yorker who works to ensure seniors are treated well in nursing homes.

How can you decide whom to vote for? I guess you vote for the one recommended by your friendly neighborhood newspaperman, or the one with the most compelling story, or the one who helps in our area. Like Lynn.

And like Cora Kelly Elementary School in Alexandria, which is in a different competition and hopes to build a new playground.

Go to playday.kaboom.org every day until Nov. 30 and vote for Cora Kelly. If it receives the most votes, it will win a $10,000 Play Day grant from playground-building charity KaBoom, Mott's and NFL Play 60.

KaBoom is itself trying to win a contest: the $200,000 American Express Members Project. Among its rivals: the Kennedy Center, the American Film Institute and the 9/11 Memorial.

Phew! That's a lot of voting, yet it only scratches the surface of this new type of charity, in which companies crowd-source corporate philanthropy. Is this "American Idol"-ization of charity, whereby we're encouraged to engage with something by casting a vote, a good thing?

What I hear is that nonprofit leaders like it," said Chuck Bean, executive director of the Nonprofit Roundtable of Greater Washington. "I've not heard a downside. The upside on the face of it is winning the prize. But there's a side benefit, and that is helping build awareness."

But as someone who still feels the sting of being bested in the election for junior high homeroom representative, I worry about the losers. Like, for example, Northern Virginia Family Service, which in February threw its hat in the ring for the Pepsi Refresh Project, one of the largest of these votefests. NVFS was hoping to be one of the top 10 vote-getters in the $50,000 category and win money to replace a broken refrigeration unit at the nonprofit's Manassas food bank.
They did all they could to mobilize supporters, which in this connected age was mainly sending Facebook messages and tweeting.

NVFS was in the lead until the last week, when the organization dropped to 13th. Pepsi re-entered NVFS for March. The group again was riding high until the very last day, when a flurry of votes for other contestants pushed it down to 11th, just out of the money.

"It would be wise to enter these expecting not to win," said NVFS's Graham Marsden, communications and marketing specialist with NVFS. "Don't expect to win, but expect to build your base with the competition, then activate it once the competition is over."

That's exactly what NVFS did. Wary of donor fatigue, the organization decided not to enter the Pepsi contest a third time. Instead, it reached out to new supporters who discovered it because of the Pepsi contest. The refrigerator was installed in the summer.

Lynn Gaubatz was honored by L'Oreal for her charity adoptalibrary.org, but because she doesn't accept any donations for that, she's supporting SOME. You too can support it (and Cora Kelly) with just a click.

**Don't forget Children's**

Children's Hospital needs more than a click, unless it's the click of a ballpoint pen as you prepare to write a check. We need to raise $400,000 by Jan. 7 to help pay the hospital bills of poor children.

To make a tax-deductible contribution, write a check or money order payable to "Children's Hospital" and mail it to Washington Post Campaign, P.O. Box 17390, Baltimore, Md. 21297-1390.

To donate online using a credit card, go to www.washingtonpost.com/childrenshospital. You can make a credit card donation by phone by calling 301-565-8501.