



GiveSmart

Frequently Asked Questions About Philanthropy

# Should I Give Anonymously or Publicly?

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In an [episode](#) of a popular HBO sitcom, the main character, Larry David, attends an event where he is being celebrated for donating a museum wing. There, he finds out his arch nemesis, Ted Danson, has also donated a museum wing, but his donation is marked as anonymous. Everyone at the event, including Larry's wife, begins to praise Ted for donating anonymously. A furious Larry exclaims, "No one told me I could be anonymous and tell people!"

As Larry discovered too late, giving publicly or anonymously isn't black or white. Philanthropy is a public expression of personal values and family commitments, with its own set of rewards and rules. Whether or not you "go public" is a matter of strategy and personal style. Ask yourself, given the change you want to see in the world, what's the right approach? Here are some key considerations behind public and anonymous giving.

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## Consider why you may want to give publicly

Was it really so wrong for Larry to put his name on that building? There are some compelling reasons for giving publicly:

- **You want to be recognized.** Let's be honest: For some, getting recognition feels good. However, the rationale for giving publicly is not just about self-satisfaction.
- **You can lend credibility.** Your personal celebrity or reputation may give credence to your cause. This is the case for [Peter and Jennifer Buffett's NoVo Foundation](#). Jennifer says, with the Buffett name, it's "daring to tackle issues of rape and sex trafficking." But the Buffetts hope that if they can focus attention and resources on these entrenched problems, others may be more willing to follow.
- **You can be an inspiration.** Your gift can inspire others to be more involved in philanthropy. At least, that's what Melinda Gates hopes. "I do think there's a crowd mentality," she says. "It becomes the right thing to do. And so, more will [give] because others are doing it."

## Consider why you may want to give anonymously

While giving anonymously is less common than giving publicly, the rationale for it can be equally compelling.

- **You believe it's better for the cause.** Giving still makes you feel good, but you believe the results you seek would be best achieved if the attention is focused on

the cause—not the donor.

- **It fits with your beliefs.** Whether it's due to your religion or personal values, you simply believe that it is better to give anonymously.
- **You want to avoid public scrutiny.** If your cause or organization is controversial, you may not want to associate your name with it (however, choosing to associate your name could also make a powerful statement as evidenced by the Buffetts' Novo Foundation above). Or, if you worry about making a mistake, anonymity shields you from the public (though sharing your mistakes also has value).
- **You want to lower your wealth profile.** You believe that if you give anonymously you may avoid unwanted pleas for donations or risks to personal safety. "Donors don't want to expose themselves to a flood of solicitation activity," said one development officer. "And there is definitely an increasing amount of that happening right now."

There are a number of significant public and anonymous gifts. According to the [Million Dollar List](#), Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett are the top contributing public donors from 2000 to 2010. However, anonymous donors rank right behind them, having contributed a total of \$6.68 billion across 818 gifts. Over the past decade anonymous gifts have ranged from 3 to 5 percent of total large gifts, according to the Indiana University's Center on Philanthropy, which compiles the Million Dollar List.

## All Donors by Total Dollars

Donor	Donor Type	Location	Total \$	# of Gifts
Warren Buffett	Individual Male	Nebraska	\$37.21 Billion	11
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Foundation	Washington	\$20.11 Billion	2243
Bill & Melinda Gates	Couple	Washington	\$10.45 Billion	5
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Trust	Foundation	Washington	\$7.32 Billion	1185
Anonymous	Anonymous	-	\$6.68 Billion	818

## Consider how public you'd like your giving to be

To determine how public to be about your giving, ask yourself:

- Do I feel that there is an expectation that I give publicly? Or, am I OK not getting credit for my contribution?
- Do I want my contribution to be only financial? Or would there be value in using my name to further support my cause?

- Will the best results be achieved if I am associated with my recipient? Or would it be better to give full attention to the recipient?
- Am I concerned about potential privacy risks, including unwanted solicitations, public scrutiny, or personal safety?

### **From Private to Public: The Chuck Feeney Story**

Charles “Chuck” Feeney may be one of the most well known anonymous—and public—donors in history. Since 1982, Feeney has given away billions. For many years, no one knew about his philanthropy, except for a very small circle of advisors. But this wasn’t an easy secret to keep. Eventually, too many people knew about Feeney’s giving. Believing he could influence others—to give as much as they could, to experience the joy of giving while still alive, and to use their presence as a positive force—Feeney went public in 1997. His fortune is now invested in a group of foundations called the [Atlantic Philanthropies](#).

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#### **SOURCES USED FOR THIS ARTICLE:**

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