

Tips for Choosing a Charity

A donor's 10-step guide to giving wisely

Here are GuideStar's tips for donors who want to give with their heads as well as their hearts.

Researching Charities

1. Clarify your values.
 - Do this before you open your checkbook, volunteer your time, or look at that letter from a charity.
2. Identify your preferences.
 - Ask yourself: "What is important to me?" The environment? Education? Hunger? Animal welfare? Helping sick children?
 - Where should the charity do its work—in your neighborhood, region, the nation, or internationally?
 - Ask yourself if you want to support a large or small charity, a new or an old one.
3. Search the GuideStar database to find charities that meet your criteria.
4. Focus on the mission.
 - Look at each charity's description in the GuideStar search results, on its Web site, or in its literature.
 - Find the nonprofits that fit best with your values.
5. Eliminate organizations that don't meet your criteria.

Now you're ready to look more closely at these organizations.

Evaluating Charities

6. Verify a charity's legitimacy.
 - If you find a charity on GuideStar (www.guidestar.org), you know it's legitimate—all nonprofits listed on GuideStar are either registered with the IRS or have given us proof of their status as legitimate nonprofits that meet the IRS criteria for tax-exempt organizations. You can see at a glance if your contribution will be deductible.
 - If the charity is not on GuideStar, ask to see its letter of determination.
 - If the organization is faith based, ask to see its official listing in a directory for its denomination.
7. Get the cold, hard facts. A reputable organization will:
 - Define its mission and programs clearly.
 - Have measurable goals.
 - Use concrete criteria to describe its achievements.
8. Compare apples to apples.

Be sure to compare charities that do the same kind of work, especially if you're looking at their finances. The type of work a charity does can affect its operating costs dramatically.

9. Avoid charities that won't share information or pressure you. Reputable nonprofits:
 - Will discuss their programs and finances.
 - Don't use pressure tactics.
 - Are willing to send you literature about their work or direct you to a Web site.
 - Will take "no" for an answer.
10. Trust your instincts.

If you still have doubts about a charity, don't contribute to it. Instead, find another nonprofit that does the same kind of work and with which you feel comfortable, then make your donation.

Suzanne E. Coffman, December 2005
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Suzanne Coffman is GuideStar's director of communications.