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Randle D. Raggio

*University of Richmond*, [rraggio@richmond.edu](mailto:rraggio@richmond.edu)

Judith Anne Garretson Folsie

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## Recommended Citation

Raggio, Randle D., and Judith Anne Garretson Folsie. "Expressions of Gratitude in Disaster Management: An Economic, Social Marketing and Public Policy Perspective on Post-Katrina Campaigns." *Journal of Public Policy & Management* 30, no. 2 (2011): 168-74. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1509/jppm.30.2.168>.

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# Expressions of Gratitude in Disaster Management: An Economic, Social Marketing, and Public Policy Perspective on Post-Katrina Campaigns

Randle D. Raggio and Judith Anne Garretson Folse

*In this article, the authors argue that in the wake of a major disaster, it is not only appropriate but also beneficial for governments to spend public funds to support official gratitude campaigns in response to outside assistance. These assertions are based on results of multiple studies on gratitude from both psychology and marketing that show that expressions of gratitude can offer both economic and social marketing benefits. Evidence demonstrates increased consumer willingness to purchase products produced in the devastated area and intentions to continue prosocial support through volunteerism and financial donations after receiving expressions of gratitude. Evidence also shows that public expressions of gratitude encourage those who did not participate in prior relief/recovery activities to do so in the future. As such, the authors recommend the implementation of a disaster management policy that encourages and rewards private and public groups to partner in similar campaigns. Such a policy leads to both economic and social rewards for the devastated areas and its citizens—and, importantly, the broader society—that outweigh and outlast the expense of the campaign. Specifically, these benefits save those directly affected by a disaster from having to bear the full burden of disaster recovery and rebuilding efforts and could increase the amount of outside economic and social assistance provided.*

*Keywords:* gratitude, social marketing, disaster management, prosocial behaviors, Hurricane Katrina, volunteer, financial donations

The recent six-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2011) represents an appropriate time to review the role of marketing activities in disaster management. Accordingly, we focus on the impact of several post-Katrina “thank you” campaigns run from Louisiana during the spring and summer of 2006 that were launched to promote recovery. As such, this article represents a response to Baker’s (2009) call for marketing scholars to contribute to the discussion on disaster management and recovery. As Baker (2009, p. 115) notes, “the affected collective [i.e., the population affected by disaster] is dependent on external resources to recover.” This observation is especially true in areas affected by disasters such as volcanoes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires, and hurricanes in which local resources can be overwhelmed or exhausted

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*Randle D. Raggio* is Assistant Professor of Marketing, Robins School of Business, University of Richmond (e-mail: rraggio@richmond.edu). *Judith Anne Garretson Folse* is V. Price LeBlanc Professor and Associate Professor of Marketing, E.J. Ourso College of Business, Louisiana State University (e-mail: folse@lsu.edu). The authors thank the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism, the E.J. Ourso College of Business Department of Marketing at Louisiana State University, and Beta Research Corporation for financial assistance. Stacey Baker served as associate editor for this article.

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and extends the implications of our research to broader disaster management policy.

In the following sections, we consider both economic and social marketing perspectives as we review studies that investigate the effects of such expressions and then suggest a research agenda and policy positions that should be incorporated into disaster management planning and execution. First, we offer an overview of Louisiana’s campaigns because they provide a context in which to examine the effects of expressions of gratitude. Second, we consider the economic perspective by reviewing results from psychology and marketing studies, summarizing the ways gratitude campaigns can promote economic exchanges. Third, we offer a social marketing perspective on how gratitude campaigns can function as a social reward for those who have participated in relief or recovery activities and as a motivator for future participation among those who have not. In this section, we provide empirical evidence from Louisiana’s “thank you” campaigns that demonstrates positive effects on both volunteerism intentions and financial donation intentions. Finally, we suggest policy initiatives and research agendas that can contribute to more effective disaster management relief and recovery efforts.

## Louisiana’s Gratitude Campaigns

Louisiana’s gratitude campaigns included both public and private efforts, but all were focused on thanking, on behalf

of the State of Louisiana and its citizens, those who generously participated in relief, recovery, and rebuilding activities. The state's official \$2.2 million television campaign began in April 2006 and included celebrities with strong ties to the state, including Emeril Lagasse, John Goodman, and Wynton Marsalis, saying "thank you." The state purchased 534 national spots and 10,340 regional spots (Northington 2006). In addition, the New Orleans Convention and Visitor's Bureau ran print advertisements featuring a "thank you" message in regional travel magazines, and a grassroots coalition of business, government, and civic leaders produced the "Louisiana Thanks You!" campaign, which featured radio public service announcements, a resolution by the state legislature, and 90 billboards around the country for three months (Raggio and Folse 2009). All campaign activities from all sources were completed by the end of August 2006, Katrina's one-year anniversary.

Examination of the concept of gratitude is important to understand the potential impacts of such expressions. We agree with Fredrickson's (2004) definition of gratitude as the emotion that arises when a person (beneficiary) perceives that another person (benefactor) or source (e.g., God, luck, fate) has intentionally acted to improve the beneficiary's well-being. "At the cornerstone of gratitude is the notion of *undeserved merit*" (Emmons 2004, p. 5, italics in original). Adam Smith, the legendary economist and philosopher, proposed that gratitude is a vital civic virtue, absolutely essential for the healthy functioning of societies (qtd. in Emmons 2004, p. 3). Komter (2004, p. 211) writes, "Without the ties created by gratitude, there would be no mutual trust, no moral basis on which to act, and no grounds for maintaining the bonds of community."

## Economic and Social Perspectives

### The Economic Perspective

Recent research findings demonstrate the favorable economic impacts of gratitude. Though not related to disaster situations, DeSteno et al. (2010) find that gratitude promotes cooperative actions among people. Specifically, those with higher levels of felt gratitude provide greater financial donations to others. Raggio and Folse (2009) demonstrate similar results from Louisiana "thank you" campaigns. They find that expressions of gratitude from Louisiana increased affective commitment toward the state for those who saw or heard a "thank you" message. In turn, and more important, increased affective commitment (as a mediator) had a positive impact on *attitudes* toward the people of Louisiana, the state of Louisiana, and products and services from Louisiana; willingness to spread positive *word of mouth* about the state; and willingness to pay a *price premium* for products and services from and travel to Louisiana. These results alone offer evidence that people who viewed this gratitude campaign were willing to participate in efforts that either directly or indirectly promoted economic recovery.

In a separate analysis, Raggio and Folse (2007) find that the number of times an advertisement was seen accounted for between 43 and 84% of the variance in travel-related measures, including willingness to pay a price premium for

travel, the amount of price premium people were willing to pay for travel, and their feelings about travel to the state. Furthermore, the results indicated that for every ten times people saw an advertisement, their estimates of the percentage price premium they would be willing to pay for travel to Louisiana increased by between 1.5 and 3.22%. Given that state tourism accounted for approximately \$8 billion in 2005, with close to 24 million visitors (Northington 2006), a 1.5% increase in actual prices paid for less than 2% of tourists to the state would be greater than the cost of the \$2.2 million official campaign. Two waves of national surveys (see subsequently) and internal research by the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism (Northington 2006) find that about one-quarter of the U.S. population had seen or heard a "thank you" message from Louisiana, indicating that such a number would be reasonable. The actual effect likely was not to increase prices paid, but rather to encourage people to consider purchasing travel and/or goods and services from Louisiana as a form of economic assistance to the state—that is, to "create or save" a substantial amount of tourism and other economic activity that otherwise would have been lost.

In disaster situations in which local resources are depleted, assistance from those without a direct connection with the region can be critical for economic recovery. Raggio and Folse (2009) find that "thank you" messages had a positive impact on those "not associated" with Louisiana (out-of-state respondents who were not former residents of the state, were not related to or friends with anyone in the state, and did not participate in any relief, recovery, or rebuilding activities). This evidence demonstrates that those who are not associated with or do not know others affected by a disaster will be more willing to offer economic assistance when they receive an expression of gratitude. This is a critical finding when we recognize that these "not-associated" people were not direct targets of the advertisements; furthermore, they "should have the least prior attachment to the state, and, given the ease with which individuals could have participated in *any* support activities (e.g., online donation to the Red Cross or the Bush-Clinton Katrina Relief Fund, solicitations through mass merchandisers and grocery chains, churches, community groups, etc.), including those not specifically targeted toward Louisiana, and that more than half of the overall respondents *did* participate in some type of assistance, these respondents have demonstrated a certain degree of detachment, or at least a lack of the kind of attachment that would indicate more positive prior attitudes, etc." (Raggio and Folse 2009, pp. 462–63, emphases in original). This positive spillover effect is important because it demonstrates that expressions of gratitude—even in a mass media context—can influence those not positively predisposed toward messages from the state.

### The Social Marketing Perspective

It would be simple to view Louisiana's "thank you" campaigns as only a tourism advertisement, focused on raising revenue from customers. Such a view still has important economic policy implications given the results reviewed previously, but it ignores the social benefits that accrue to public expressions of gratitude. Andreasen (2007) defines

social marketing as the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences to improve their personal welfare or that of the *society of which they are a part*. In this section, we evaluate the effects of Louisiana's "thank you" campaigns on society, thus justifying the application of a social marketing perspective.

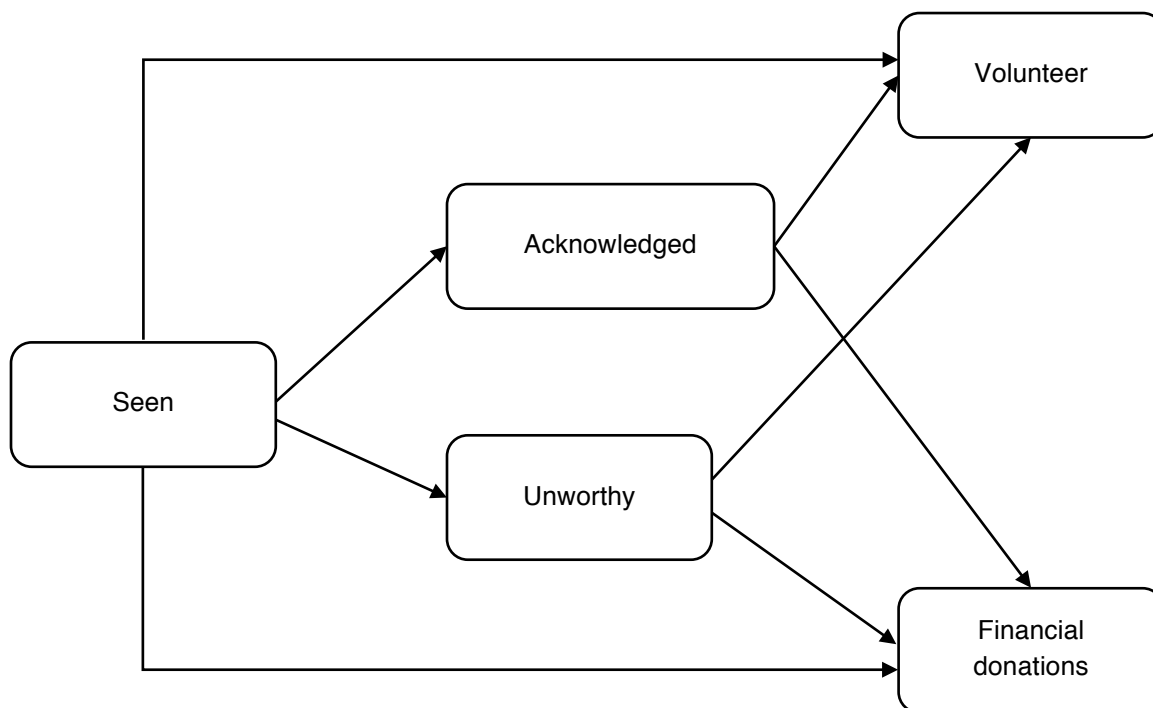
During the past decade, scholars in psychology have found that gratitude encourages prosocial behaviors. McCullough and Tsang (2004) summarize research that suggests that recipients of sincere expressions of gratitude (the original benefactor) are more likely to act prosocially toward the expresser (the original beneficiary) and other parties that they did not initially benefit. This stream of research supports such effects even when they are costly to the original benefactor and benefit mere strangers (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; DeSteno et al. 2010). Such findings parallel earlier findings by marketing scholars. As Bendapudi, Singh, and Bendapudi (1996, p. 41) state, "labeling people as kind, generous, or helpful elicits greater motivation to help and greater helping ... and fosters favorable attitudes toward the soliciting organization." Although this research on gratitude and prosocial behaviors was conducted outside the context of disaster management, it offers intriguing possibilities for such application.

We suggest that participation in relief, recovery, or rebuilding activities by either volunteering or donating money is a social good, especially because it relieves governments from having to generate such resources directly.

As Rothschild and Andreasen (1998, p. 295) note, "Much social issue marketing fails because, while managers use some tools of marketing, they don't consider the exchange that is the heart of marketing; they ask targets to behave in the self interest of society without offering anything in the immediate and personal self interest of the target ... and then [do] not offer an explicit payback to compensate for the requested behavior." To those who participate in relief or rebuilding activities, expressions of gratitude can be regarded as an extrinsic reward for their participation (Andreasen 1995), which encourages similar behaviors in the future. This positive impact of expressions of gratitude on future actions arises from the "moral reinforcer" role of gratitude; that is, expressions of gratitude encourage additional, future prosocial behavior (McAdams and Bauer 2004; McCullough and Tsang 2004). In essence, expressions of gratitude produce a "pay-it-forward" effect.

To further explore the social marketing perspective of gratitude within disaster management, we provide findings from an empirical study that addresses whether Louisiana's "thank you" campaigns encouraged intentions to volunteer and donate money to relief/rebuilding activities in the future. Before conducting this national study, we predicted that *benefactors'* beliefs that they are appreciated and appropriately thanked and their perceptions of *beneficiaries* as unworthy or ungrateful would mediate this relationship (Figure 1). We expected these predictions to hold even among those not associated with the efforts that prompted the expressions of gratitude, which tests the true social marketing benefit of a gratitude campaign.

**Figure 1. The Impact of Expressions of Gratitude (Seen) on Volunteer and Financial Donation Intentions, Mediated by Acknowledged and Unworthy**





## Empirical Study Participants and Measures

We collected data through two waves of a national online survey, hosted and managed by Beta Research Corporation of Syosset, N.Y. The respondents for the survey were recruited from the Beta Research Panel, comprised of more than 50,000 people across the United States over the age of 18. The first wave was collected April 20–30, 2006, eight months after Hurricane Katrina and two weeks after the start of the official state campaign (April 6). This wave resulted in 1782 complete surveys from all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia. Sixty-five percent of the participants were women (average age: 44), and 35% were men (average age: 50). Wave 2 data were collected from the same panel November 9–17, 2006, fifteen months after Katrina, seven months after the first survey, and nearly three months after all campaign activities had ceased. This second wave resulted in 2689 complete surveys from all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia. Women represented 55% of the sample (average age: 55), and men represented 45% (average age: 45). The advantage of an online survey using an existing panel is that we were able to collect thousands of responses from every state in a short period. The potential limitations include the relationship between expressed intentions and actual behavior and the inability to assign respondents randomly to conditions as with a quasi-experimental design (Stangor 2011); instead, we relied on self-reports of participation in relief/rebuilding activities and whether they saw a “thank you” advertisement. We address this limitation by isolating responses from those who self-identify as not having participated in any prior relief/rebuilding activities, suggesting that these respondents possess either a neutral or even a negative predisposition toward our topic of study (see subsequently).

Variables gathered included whether respondents had seen the campaign, were located in or outside the state, and participated in relief/recovery efforts. The two primary prosocial dependent measures gathered included (1) volunteerism intentions, which is conceptualized as one’s willingness to volunteer for recovery/rebuilding efforts in the future, and (2) financial donation intentions, which is one’s willingness to contribute money toward recovery/rebuilding efforts in the future. To test the predicted mediation effects, we measured both acknowledgment and unworthiness. We assessed acknowledgment, which reflects the degree to which Louisiana appreciated and appropriately thanked those who offered assistance, with a two-item, seven-point Likert scale, and we assessed unworthiness, which reflects the degree to which people from Louisiana are considered ungrateful and greedy, also with a two-item, seven-point Likert scale (correlation coefficients for both measures exceeded .80). For Wave 2, we added a measure of the number of times a respondent had seen or heard a “thank you” advertisement across various media.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Because the purpose of the social marketing perspective is to provide overall evidence of the prosocial impacts of a gratitude campaign following a natural disaster, we offer a brief description of the procedures and specific measures gathered. More information about the specifics of the two waves, including additional sample details and measures, is available on request from the first author.

## Results

We conducted a 2 (wave: 1 vs. 2)  $\times$  2 (“thank you” campaign seen: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (state: inside Louisiana vs. outside Louisiana)  $\times$  2 (participated in relief/recovery efforts: yes vs. no) multivariate analysis of covariance on volunteerism intentions and financial donation intentions on the entire sample, with age, sex, and geographical distance from New Orleans as covariates.<sup>2</sup> Of note, wave has no significant main effect on either volunteerism intentions ( $F(1, 4372) = 1.42, p > .10$ ) or financial donation intentions ( $F(1, 4372) = 1.14, p > .10$ ), indicating that it is appropriate to consider both waves simultaneously. It is conceptually appropriate to collapse these two waves because the questions we explore in this study were identical across both waves (except for number of times seen, which we collected only in Wave 2, as discussed subsequently) and our research questions broadly pertained to the overall impact of expressions of gratitude and their impact over time. This finding is noteworthy because it indicates that the impact of the “thank you” message persisted, unchanged, for seven months and nearly three months after the end of all campaign activities.

We find a significant main effect of “thank you” campaign seen on both volunteerism intentions ( $F(1, 4372) = 64.847, p < .001; M_{\text{seen}} = 4.43$  vs.  $M_{\text{not seen}} = 3.77$ ) and financial donation intentions ( $F(1, 4372) = 67.606, p < .001; M_{\text{seen}} = 4.72$  vs.  $M_{\text{not seen}} = 3.90$ ). This effect is further supported by additional data collected only in Wave 2. In this second wave, participants were asked the number of times they saw or heard “thank you” in various media. The results of a regression analysis with out-of-state respondents on these two prosocial dependent measures, with age, sex, distance, former, related, and participated as covariates, reveal that the number of times a person saw or heard “thank you” (as reported across various media) has a significant impact on evaluations across both dependent measures.

It is possible that the people predisposed to react positively to messages from Louisiana drove these results. To test this alternative hypothesis (consistent with Raggio and Folse [2009]), we repeated the analysis with only the out-of-state respondents who did not participate in any relief/recovery activities, were not former residents of Louisiana, and were not friends or relatives with anyone in the state. This is a conservative test because more than 50% of respondents indicated that they had participated in some type of relief/recovery activity, leading us to exclude from analysis any respondents who felt compelled to provide a socially desirable (false) response. Consistent with the analysis of the entire sample, the main effect of “thank you” campaign seen yields a positive effect on both volunteerism intentions ( $F(1, 1283) = 4.061, p < .05; M_s 3.38$  vs.  $3.10$ )

<sup>2</sup>We gathered additional covariates, including age, sex, distance from New Orleans, whether respondent was a former resident of the state (former), and whether the respondent was friends with or related to (associated with) a current resident of the state. We calculated geographical distance as the straight-line distance from the respondents’ zip codes to New Orleans’ zip code 70130, which includes the French Quarter. Unfortunately, we could not include former and associated as covariates in this analysis because in-state respondents did not provide responses for these items. We included these in analyses of the subset “not associated.”

and financial donation intentions ( $F(1, 1283) = 5.467, p < .025$ ;  $M_s 3.57$  vs.  $3.27$ ). Again, wave is not a significant factor. These results are substantially identical to those from the entire sample, allowing us again to reject the alternative hypothesis.

As we did for the overall sample, we conducted an additional analysis using the number of times seen measure from out-of-state respondents. We regressed number of times seen against the two prosocial dependent measures, with age, sex, and distance as covariates. We find that the number of times a person saw or heard “thank you” (as reported across various media) has a significant impact on volunteerism intentions ( $\beta = .156, p = .003$ ), but the impact on financial donation intentions does not reach the accepted level of significance ( $\beta = .094, p < .10$ ). In each regression, age was the only significant covariate, with intentions in both cases declining with age.

Because of the cross-sectional nature of our data, it is impossible to prove causality. However, by investigating those “not associated,” we provide evidence that the results were not primarily driven by positive predisposition to messages from Louisiana. We now consider the impact of benefactors’ perceptions of the likelihood of being acknowledged for participating and their perceptions of beneficiaries’ worthiness to receive assistance.

Following Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998), we complete four steps to assess the mediating role of acknowledgment and unworthiness and confirm the mediation by a Sobel test (Baron and Kenny 1986). Analysis of the overall sample indicates that both acknowledgment and unworthiness partially mediate the impact of “thank you” campaign seen on financial donation intentions, but only acknowledgment partially mediates the impact of this factor on volunteer intentions.

We expected that unworthiness would mediate the relationship between “thank you” campaign seen and the two dependent measures for the “not associated” sample in the same way as for the overall sample.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to expectations, we find that unworthiness does not act as a mediator of either dependent measure for those “not associated,” indicating a direct effect of the exposure to the “thank you” message. In summary, Figure 1 correctly portrays the effects in the overall sample (except the path between unworthiness and volunteerism intentions), but only direct paths are significant for the “not associated” subset.

For the overall sample, respondents seem to be concerned with reward/recognition for themselves and whether the recipient is worthy of a financial contribution. This makes sense if we consider that a financial donation usually involves an intermediary that collects and disperses the funds, and thus it is not a direct contribution to a beneficiary. In such cases, it would be reasonable for a benefactor to consider as much information as possible, including both personal and recipient-focused information. When it comes to personal participation (i.e., volunteering), however, respondents seem to consider only whether their actions will be acknowledged, not the worthiness of beneficiaries.

<sup>3</sup>Because this group did not participate in any prior activities, it is unnecessary to test the mediating effect of being appreciated or thanked because, for these respondents, there is nothing to acknowledge.

It might be that people who are considering being personally involved reserve judgment until they see the beneficiaries for themselves, have well-developed expectations from prior experience with similar groups, or, because their personal involvement carries intrinsic rewards, do not care about the worthiness of the recipients. The last point is a reasonable hypothesis if we consider the expected social reactions to giving money to known “unworthy” recipients versus volunteering on their behalf. We suggest that the former would be considered foolish, whereas the latter would be considered generous or compassionate.

## Public Policy Implications

We argue that both the economic and the social perspectives of gratitude effects offer evidence that gratitude campaigns represent an important missing component of disaster management. The empirical evidence demonstrates that gratitude campaigns encourage both those associated and those not associated with a disaster to either directly or indirectly behave in ways that promote recovery, which affects the broader society by encouraging future economic and volunteer support. This pay-it-forward effect removes some of the burden of government. We suggest that these findings have significant implications for disaster management preparation and execution for all types of natural disasters and should be included in preplanning and execution. Next, we present items for a research agenda along with broader considerations for disaster management policy.

First, with respect to segmentation, media, and message considerations for public policy makers, our results reveal both the efficiency and the effectiveness of broad expressions of gratitude in a mass media context because of the positive spillover effects on those who are not direct targets. The implication is that for general expressions of gratitude, the wider the reach, the higher the frequency, and the more public the expression, the better. However, our mediation results identify differences between those who saw and heard and those who did not see or hear a “thank you.” Broad public expressions (i.e., mass media) need not focus on the worthiness of the beneficiary; our results for those not associated demonstrate no mediation of the effect on either volunteer or financial donations. In contrast, direct or private expressions to those who *did* participate should connect to more public media expressions (acknowledgment) and also remind benefactors of the worthiness of beneficiaries.

The question remains whether positive effects for those not associated are due to positive or negative forces. It is possible that the “moral reinforcer” role of gratitude functions in a positive way to encourage prosocial behavior, such that the act of thanking people makes them feel more generous. However, it is also possible that thanking people induces feelings of guilt that are only removed by future participation. Our results do not allow us to determine which force has more impact, but clearer insights into the sources of such behavioral intentions would enhance our understanding of intentions to give or volunteer by nonparticipants and increase the effectiveness of such messages. We advocate that academic researchers investigate this important issue.

Second, public policy should encourage public/private partnerships to increase the reach and frequency of the

message. Governments have formal agency-based relationships with organizations and citizens (e.g., through tax or licensing authorities). Although governments have access to mass media and earned media/public relations, they may be overwhelmed with the details of disaster management (e.g., ice and water delivery, housing, transportation, logistics). In contrast, business and private organizations may have expertise that can assist with encouraging and acknowledging/rewarding participation. For example, Lamar Advertising was critical in communicating Louisiana's gratitude using outdoor advertising around the country. Nongovernmental organizations also can leverage their social networks to encourage relief/recovery efforts and pass on expressions of gratitude through social media, taking advantage of these networks' vast reach and word-of-mouth effects. An important question is how governments can effectively engage existing social networks without infringing on privacy. Partnership seems to be the key, but what is necessary to facilitate such partnerships? Additional research on this topic is required.

Finally, it is clear that media portrayals of victims of Hurricane Katrina likely affected perceptions of potential beneficiaries as "unworthy" and had the potential to influence subsequent behavior (Guion, Scammon, and Borders 2007). Media outlets initially employed a theme of "civil unrest" to describe the response of disaster victims in New Orleans and then shifted to a theme of "urban warfare," though a subsequent review has found that many claims of violence and lawlessness were greatly exaggerated (Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006, p. 57). In such a media environment, our results are impressive indications of the power of expressions of gratitude to overcome negative media images. More important, such insights call for public efforts to proactively develop positive media relationships. Folse and Raggio (2010) investigate the impact of media stories on respondents' open-ended comments from the surveys we described previously in response to the question: "Is there anything you would like to tell us?" Using standard qualitative research protocols, they identify themes and meta-themes present in the open-ended comments, as well as in the *New York Times* and *USA Today* during the months the surveys were administered. As mentioned previously, survey responses were consistent and positive across both waves, though two inconsistencies between media and respondent themes are worth noting. First, "greedy," "criminal," and "racism" themes appeared in both waves of media but only in Wave 2 of consumer responses. Given the continuing portrayal of New Orleans citizens as such, it is not surprising that these themes (which may have been latent in Wave 1 consumer responses) became manifest in Wave 2. Second, the theme of "hope" was found in both waves of media (though usually at the bottom of most stories) but did not appear in either wave of consumer responses. This suggests an important asymmetry between good news and bad news that policy makers need to anticipate, especially because many of the stories written in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina were untrue (Gillin 2005). Finally, in the open-ended responses in Wave 2, Folse and Raggio (2010) find an emergent theme of "exhausted sympathy," characterized as frustration that those receiving assistance were not helping themselves. It is intriguing to

consider how perceptions of worthiness generated by expressions of gratitude may moderate this feeling among respondents.

In closing, the six-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina represents an appropriate time to reflect on the role of marketing activities in disaster management from an economic, social marketing, and public policy perspective. Hurricane Katrina was a unique event; however, it is possible to identify the important role of social marketing activities in disaster management and recovery. Social marketing activities that acknowledge and reward participation in past relief/rebuilding activities can encourage future participation, even among those who did not participate in the past and are not associated with the impacted area. Such activities lead to both economic and social rewards for the devastated area and its citizens—and, importantly, the broader society—that outweigh and outlast the expense of the campaign. Specifically, these benefits save those directly affected by a disaster from having to bear the full financial, physical, and/or emotional burden of recovery and rebuilding efforts and could increase the amount of outside economic and social assistance provided. While first responders and other government agencies are engaged in "on-the-ground" efforts, governments should leverage partnerships to assist in the vital task of recognition and reward. We encourage researchers to further explore the policy implications of expressions of gratitude and the important themes that have emerged from analysis of individual responses to such expressions.

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