

# The science behind rewards & recognition for political engagement programs

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[Amy Showalter](#) & [Dr. Kelton Rhoads](#)

*Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.*

Whether for your PAC investors or grassroots program participants, providing rewards and recognition have been a constant practice of government relations professionals. Rewards reinforce a program's culture and norms by vividly displaying appropriate advocacy and PAC giving behaviors. However, are rewards more efficacious for motivating future behavior or communicating organizational norms? Do they even motivate behavior?

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### **Ignore the Golden Rule**

Whatever type of recognition we choose to provide, we need to ignore the golden rule. We often fall into the trap of “Well, I think this would be a nice reward, so they will, too!” This is why many an organization storage closet is cluttered with political and patriotic trinkets and gifts—we are in the political profession, and we assume that our volunteers value those types of gifts.

### **Do Rewards Always Lead to Desirable Behaviors?**

There is no easy answer here. While intuition and a lot of social science research supports the connection between rewards and increases in the rewarded behavior, additional research has shown that *rewards can decrease, rather than increase, desirable behaviors. They don't always have a positive effect.*

In fact, psychologists have discovered instances in which rewards reliably *decrease* desired behaviors! This is particularly the case when a person may naturally want to engage in a beneficial activity, and then is rewarded for doing so.

While some behaviors are unpleasant enough that a substantial reward (such as pay, services or returned favors) are the only way of ensuring their completion, there are many activities in which people will engage without benefit of any type of reward, because these behaviors are intrinsically motivating. For example, if you are one of those people who, if you won the lottery, would keep your current job, you are intrinsically motivated. There are psychological rewards to be found in being productive that surpass (even well-funded) leisure. Research indicates that rewarding people for performing intrinsically motivated activities can actually decrease participation in those desirable activities.

### **The No-Cost Motivator # 1— Helping Them Become More of Who They Are**

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Kelton once helped conduct an experiment where experimenters asked students to perform a handwriting exercise. When the researchers asked the students to perform the exercise, they attempted to motivate the students in two different ways. One was to promise a reward that would follow the student's performance: "If you do this handwriting exercise, you will get to choose any one of these rewards after you're done!" The second method was to merely attribute a positive motivation to the student and offer no reward: "You look like the kind of person who would like to have good handwriting, and would be willing to practice it in order to improve."

This second method is an effective persuasive tactic called "altercasting," where the influence agent tells the prospect that the prospect appears to have positive motivations, and that the prospect is a good person for acting on those motivations. Used correctly, altercasting enables people to tap into positive internal motivations for performing, and understanding why they perform a particular activity.

When the researchers analyzed the quality of handwriting samples between the different conditions in the experiment, they discovered that the students in the altercasting situation put significantly more effort into their work, which was visible in the quality of their handwriting. On the other hand, the students who had been rewarded for practicing their handwriting showed lower quality work.

As Kelton summarized, "It appears that people take a cue from their own behaviors as to why they do what they do. Give someone a large reward for doing something they would have done anyway, and they will tend to think to themselves, 'I must have done this for the large reward.' Give them a small reward or no reward at all for doing something they believe in, and they are more likely to draw the conclusion, 'I obviously didn't do this for the reward, I did it because I believe in it.' *And that is exactly the way we want people to think when it comes to pledging allegiance*

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*towards our PAC or grassroots causes. We want believers more than those who mindlessly comply.”*

Your “true believer” volunteers are usually intrinsically motivated, so habitually recognize them via altercasting. Research shows that *attention* is one of the strongest of all motivators. The lack of internal mentors and coaches inside an organization makes attention as a recognition form more potent than ever before. Grassroots and PAC professionals have the opportunity to provide this gift through the altercasting technique.

***The Bottom Line:*** Have high expectations, communicate them, and express faith in your team’s ability to achieve them.

## **The No-Cost Motivator #2 – Learn from the Rats and the Casinos**

Social scientists often learn a lot about how to motivate humans by learning how to motivate rats. Human motivation is remarkably similar to rats —and monkeys and dogs and amoebas and all other living beings. Social scientists that study rewards have noticed that a rat will work diligently at pressing a lever to receive a food reward under some conditions, and will work as little as possible for the same amount of food under other conditions.

As it turns out, rat productivity depends on the incentive that is in place. One instance that leads to an indolent rat is when he receives food after a fixed number of lever presses —the rat learns to count.

Another reward system that leads to a lazy rat is when he is confident that he will receive the reward after a minimal amount of work has been accomplished. Here, the rat learns to count and watch the clock. The rat will start pressing the lever around the time he learned the reward may occur, and will press enough times to meet the minimum requirement. At times in which the rat does not expect a reward, he hits the beach to relax some more.

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The industrious rat is the one who is *uncertain* of either the time or the effort required until the next food pellet drops, even though this rat receives just the same amount of food for his efforts that his food counting and clock watching peers do. When a variable number of presses and a random amount of time passes, the rat will assiduously stay late at the office, tapping his lever and acquiring a store of food pellets.

***Ask Yourself.*** . . . Do you ever wonder why you lose PAC and grassroots momentum? Could it be that your members know exactly when they should become more active with your PAC and grassroots, therefore lessening their interest as your rewards and incentives dissipate?

### **Casinos as Exemplars of Motivation**

If you cannot see that humans are rat-like in their response to reward systems, observe the lever pulling behavior on your next trip to Las Vegas. I wonder if it was the first casino owners, rather than the first Behaviorists, who discovered that a fixed number of lever pulls did not get gamblers to relinquish their money as efficiently as those that kept the lever-pulling humans in a state of uncertainty. The science tells us that humans (and all living organisms) *will work harder for rewards that occur at variable time and effort intervals.*

Perhaps the PAC or grassroots leader who sometimes rewards positive behavior and sometimes doesn't is actually quite skilled at increasing involvement. (Of course, the ones who do not distinguish between positive behavior and all kinds of behavior undermine desirable behavior by doing so.)

***The Bottom Line:*** All other things being equal, the leader who acknowledges *only desirable behavior at sporadic intervals* may confidently expect to see an increase in those behaviors.