

Red Cross got half of Katrina donations: Reputation and Web use noted as factors in donor preference

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A year ago, Americans started signing checks and clicking on Web links to raise an estimated \$4.2 billion in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the most they have ever donated in response to a natural disaster, according to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

After Katrina roared ashore August 29, the worst U.S. natural disaster in the Internet age offered a model for how donors might respond to future catastrophes: increasingly online, and to the largest, most established charities.

Amid the slew of charities and foundations publicizing their posthurricane efforts, the American Red Cross collected the most: at least \$2.1 billion, or about half of the total collected in the United States, the *Chronicle* reported.

Other big charities collected large amounts: the Salvation Army, \$363 million; Catholic Charities USA, \$146 million; the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, \$129 million; and Habitat for Humanity International, \$123 million.

The Red Cross was able to outdo these and smaller charities because of its renown and its more sophisticated Internet presence, said Trent Stamp, executive director of the Charity Navigator, which rates charities and is based in Mahwah, New Jersey.

“The Red Cross has that old rigid reputation,” Stamp said. “They’ve been around millions of years. But in terms of being Web-savvy, they’re as smart as it comes. . . . They had partnerships with all the major online portals—AOL, Yahoo, MSN—that other charities didn’t have.

“When donations started flowing in at record rates, a lot of smaller Web sites not as technologically savvy were having sites crash. People weren’t going to come back to finish their donation. The Red Cross had their site in place,” Stamp said.

Usually 10 percent to 15 percent of donors contribute online, but for Katrina that figure was 20 percent, he said. And because Internet donors give more, on average, their contributions made up 35 percent of the total given.

“People were trying to act as quickly as they possibly could,” Stamp said. “It was an ‘impulse give’ in a lot of ways. A lot of these organizations’ . . . telephone lines were not equipped to handle people who were trying to make the phone calls. And the Internet stays open 24 hours.”

The hurricane relief picture was also complicated by some new and inexperienced charities making appeals, said Sandra Miniutti, director of external relations for Charity Navigator. But the efficiency of some “brand-name” religious organizations that tapped into their bases of volunteers around the country impressed the Red Cross, which indicated that it may partner with more faith groups, Miniutti said. – *Religion News Service, Associated Baptist Press*