



# The Giving Cart

By Melissa Ezarik

## Creating a shopping cart experience for online donor transactions

The idea was simple: Let online donors make multiple gifts with a single checkout. Not long after Randy Brown joined the Michigan State University advancement team as webmaster in 1999, he got assigned this task, which was anything but simple to execute.

“That was sort of his night job,” says Bob Thomas, assistant vice president for advancement marketing and communications. “It was kind of a running joke. We’d talk about it at annual planning meetings.” One year, someone even presented a mini shopping cart at the meeting to Brown as a tangible reminder.

With close to 5,000 potential MSU

gift allocations, many donors were already completing a gift transaction and then going right back in and shopping again, adds Brown—who not only built a cart but has since made it better.

The initial version went live in 2007. “Now we’re at version 35,” says Brown, who is director of web services today. Always a work in progress, the current site allows donors to search for specific funds, by name, from within the cart, and gives fundraisers the ability to send a thank-you email with a link to a pre-populated form.

Worth the effort? The numbers say so. The average pledge made via the web is \$244.03, more than \$100 higher than

the average pledge made via direct mail or email, and more than \$150 higher than the average from telemarketing.

While no one thinks twice about the e-commerce functionality of Amazon and other consumer shopping websites, few in higher education are thinking beyond a “donate now” button linking to a basic transaction form. Yet, online giving grew by nearly 18 percent in 2012 for the education sector, according to data from nonprofit software and services provider Blackbaud. And, average higher ed online donation amounts are higher compared to other sectors. “It’s not uncommon to have a gift of \$300,” says Steven R. MacLaughlin, director of

Blackbaud’s Idea Lab.

Blackbaud research has also shown that education focuses more on restricted giving, with donors wanting their dollars reaching specific areas.

So why aren’t giving-website capabilities in higher ed more robust? “Everyone understands that they need to do more in that area—but the question is, ‘Where do we do it and how do we do it?’” says Justin J. Ware, director of interactive communication at Bentz Whaley Flessner (BWF), a consulting firm that works with colleges and other nonprofits to build constituent development programs.

“I haven’t met one client who wouldn’t love to have a Ticketmaster kind of experience,” says Voltaire Santos Miran, co-founder and CEO of mStoner. In his work designing and building education institution websites, he can’t help but notice that most giving sites “look as boring now as they did 10 years ago.” Donors may give online, but they investigate where to give outside of the giving

site—because they usually have to.

As for a school official’s Amazon-like site dreams, he’ll point out that its “simple” shopping experience probably cost billions in development.

**‘It’s not just a shopping cart, but a story to help you understand the goal and what it is you’re giving to.’**

—Justin J. Ware, Bentz Whaley Flessner

But it’s not just tight budgets that are making schools skittish about giving sites with lots of giving choices. “The fear is, ‘If we provide donors with specific targeted options, will they support our annual fund?’” notes Ware. “It’s a valid concern. Sure, you’re going to have some people who will give in one place but not another, but by and large, you maintain support.”

What has motivated some institutions to develop shopping-cart functionality for their giving websites, and how did they make it happen? The first step in offering this kind of experience is making it a priority. Next steps involve getting the job done right.

### Envision a New “Give Now”

What made Brendon Steenbergen such an appealing candidate when he expressed interest in the position of director of development for annual and planned giving at Columbia College (Mo.)? It was what he had wanted to do in his job at the University of Missouri, but couldn’t because he didn’t get the green light. That pitch had been to create a gift cart for donor transactions.

Columbia’s Michael Kateman, executive director of development and alumni and public relations and the hiring manager, was sold on that idea. He saw the cart concept as a win for fundraising, alumni affinity building, and community



**Read all about it:** Considering a donation to Michigan State U or Columbia College? Philanthropists can get engaged in stories about various areas in need of funding. Columbia’s “temperature bar” gives donors a visual reminder of how their gift, of any size, would move the fund closer to its goal.

relations. Not to mention, it could be “very user-friendly, somewhat informative, and entertaining,” he recalls thinking. “It’s kind of a non-threatening way to be introduced to philanthropy. But for the more seasoned, it’s a quick and easy way to make your gift.”

The way Steenbergen saw it, university giving pages were missing the marketing component, an issue that his team’s creation, Columbia’s ChooseCC.org, does not have. “Only those who already knew they wanted to make a gift went to the site,” he says of other giving pages. “I figured what we really needed was something that drives people to give.”

When MIT contacted mStoner several years ago to help launch a new giving site, administrators shared the need to drive people there outside of December 31 and tax day. “We thought it would be really cool to create this robust website where there’s ... a depth and breadth of information,” says Miran. MIT was well-

positioned for a giving cart. “Their institutional policy was that you could give to anything you wanted—you could support the vegetarian student organization.

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It made sense to have a model where you could choose at a granular level where you wanted your gift to go,” he explains.

MacLaughlin’s research on 10 large universities reveals a donor-centric approach to giving. It’s a shift away from just hitting a button to donate. And the

approach requires building a dedicated site around giving.

**Construct a Cart**

Whether an internal or external web development team builds a gift cart, the project takes a team. For MIT, Miran explains, his firm handled the site’s framing and basic prototyping, basing it on the Amazon experience and including more than a dozen screens of workflow. He worked with the donor relations and alumni relations offices, and “all the tech stuff” was handled in-house.

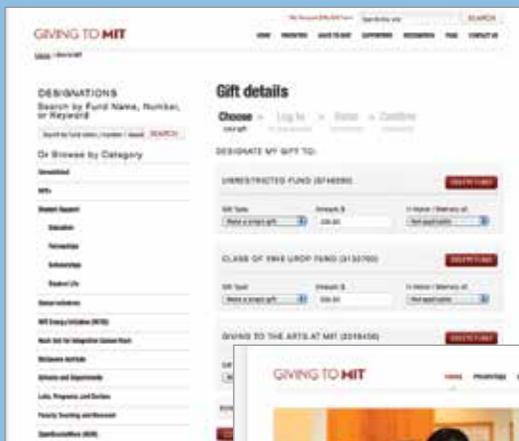
Steenbergen’s ideas for Columbia College were influenced by MIT’s site and nonprofits from other industries, including Kiva and DonorsChoose.org. His research inspired the addition of a bar graph on the college’s site to show donors, at a glance, how their gifts contribute to an end goal. For example, if someone chooses to support the purchase of a \$300 microscope, he can watch that “temperature bar” rise after any size donation is made.

Other e-commerce-enriched sites within the institution may also inspire. Take the athletics ticket website. While it traditionally operates apart from main fundraising sites, MacLaughlin could see the value in institutions combining those systems or sharing data across them.

With about 20 school giving sites that Blackbaud investigated, “the vast majority had built homegrown custom forms,” MacLaughlin says, adding that many were moving toward more commercial systems to keep up with the changing technology. “Try, learn from it, and change” is the approach he advises. Start with a simple cart and find what works over time.

“When these sites are bad, it’s because the appropriate investment hasn’t been made,” says Rae Goldsmith, vice president of advancement resources for the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. She believes it’s crucial for the





MIT's check-out page allows donors to add an item to the cart, and then click on another fund area and select more to "add to gift form" before completing the transaction.

Donors may also explore possible funds to choose from and read stories about them while on the home page Giving to MIT.



team to understand how these sites work, the donor experience, and the institution's goals.

### Stock the Shelves

Infrastructure is one piece of the shopping cart investment. Content is the other.

"It's not just a shopping cart, but a story to help you understand the goal and what it is you're giving to," says Ware of BWF. Including robust content related to funds a donor can choose to give to is crucial to making the shopping cart concept a success.

Miran says it has always been a challenge to come up with compelling stories. The content exists, but offices across campus aren't necessarily sharing with advancement. "The stories of the successful alumni never make it to the

giving office," he explains. Yet, those stories can help drive giving to an endowment named after an alum or the academic program that prepared the person for life after college.

Columbia features a handful of "marquee items" as giving options at any one time. Items have included 50-cent bricks to help construct a new science building and a speakers' endowment fund to coincide with a press announcement on an upcoming campus speaker, Steenbergen says.

Steenbergen has since moved on to UW Medicine, the University of Washington's medical school. Nathan Fleischmann, who serves in Steenbergen's former position at Columbia, says the decisions about what to feature "are fun to make and also of great value to the user."

For the Marquette University (Wis.)

giving site, which has a cart powered by iModules, deciding what to highlight is difficult, says Sara Harvey, senior director of annual campaigns. The site is meant to meet the needs of the most Marquette constituents possible, so "we tend to feature very broad initiatives that have an immediate impact to the university." Broadly marketed capital priorities, such as the College of Engineering building fund or the Dental School expansion, are included, too.

Harvey's team sends out about 12 e-solicitations a year and also promotes the giving site through alumni newsletters and traditional mailings and calls.

Steenbergen says his team at Columbia realized early on "that if we didn't push [the site], didn't market it, it couldn't flourish in and of itself on an island. It needed to be attractive to the public and the public needed to be made aware of it."

Once potential donors explore the content and are prepared to give, how easy will the transaction itself be? Is it full of clicks and steps? That's a giveaway it was engineer-designed, not donor-designed, says Blackbaud's MacLaughlin. "More clicks means less conversation, and less conversation is bad."

### Resources

Blackbaud, [www.blackbaud.com](http://www.blackbaud.com)

CASE, [www.case.org](http://www.case.org)

Columbia College giving site, [www.choosecc.org](http://www.choosecc.org)

Giving to Marquette, [www.marquette.edu/giving](http://www.marquette.edu/giving)

Giving to MIT, <http://giving.mit.edu>

iModules, [www.iModules.com](http://www.iModules.com)

Michigan State University's online giving form, [www.givingto.msu.edu/gift](http://www.givingto.msu.edu/gift)

mStoner, [www.mstoner.com](http://www.mstoner.com)

### The Valued Customer Checklist

Shopping cart tools are only an enhancement to an institution's website when they enhance, rather than inhibit, the donor's experience. Here are nine questions the project team can ask to ensure that the giving transaction is a positive one.

- ✓ Is the site's functionality intuitive?
- ✓ How many clicks does it take to get to and through the transaction?
- ✓ Is the transaction form simple, with only questions that are necessary to complete it?
- ✓ Is there a link to the donation form from our institution's homepage?
- ✓ Is the site responsive so that donors can give via their phone or tablet?
- ✓ Can donors looking to give quickly choose an unrestricted gift?
- ✓ Are there both broad and highly specific gift choices?
- ✓ Can donors click for more information about a fund right from the form page?
- ✓ Can a previous donor log in for a prepopulated transaction form and to download donation information for tax purposes?



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