
The Donor Project

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The perennial, deadly reality that is the national transplant waiting list exists despite the good intentions of Americans. Various estimates indicate that one fourth to one half of all adults have signaled their intent to be an organ donor; that's 50 to 100 million people. So what's the problem? If more than 50 million people have signed on to be donors, shouldn't that be sufficient to eliminate the national waiting list of 100,000 plus? Why are 18 people still dying every day for want of an organ?

These are the questions I set out to answer after being told that my kidneys were shutting down. Four hours of dialysis 3 days a week provides a lot of time for research. After only 18 months on the transplant list, I received a new kidney on August 3, 2004. My wait was not as long as some—usually it's 3 to 5 years—but it was long enough for me to take a hard look at the mismatch between the good intentions of donors and the reality of the national transplant waiting list.

What I found is that no one really knows who and where all the donors are. True, there is a patchwork of databases kept mainly by state motor vehicle departments and regional donor organizations, but a truly national database does not exist. So I decided to apply my 35 years of advertising and marketing experience to create such a list and founded The Donor Project, a nonprofit organization, to do it. If you think about it as a marketing problem, it's quite simple. We need to conduct a marketing campaign to sign up millions of people which, actuarially speaking, will yield enough deceased donors annually to eliminate the current national transplant waiting list.

It is not a lot of people when you think in marketing terms. For instance, a particularly graphic video game sold over 6 million copies in the week after its release last May. The company that registered those sales—some \$500 million worth—did it because it had a product people wanted, and it used tried and true marketing strategies that had people waiting in line to buy it.

That's what The Donor Project will do. We know we have a willing audience—those 50 or 100 million people who have already indicated their intention to be donors. We just need to create a national marketing campaign using all the bells and whistles employed by the likes of Coke, Pepsi, Nike, and Adidas to get them on our list. Our theme: "LEAVE IT. Be an organ donor."

Highlighting the campaign will be a drive to sign up potential donors on National Donor Sabbath, which is observed every year in early November. That's when the nation's 225,000 churches and synagogues focus on the importance of organ

donation. We've developed a system to register potential donors at their place of worship by scanning their driver's license or photo ID—much like what is done for age verification in bars—and securing a signed consent form. The information can then be securely downloaded from the scanners and organized into a database that will be accessible to the critical links in the transplant chain—first responders, automobile communication systems like OnStar, transplant centers, and UNOS. If just a small percentage of the people who regularly attend church sign up, we will have met our goal.

Just imagine the impact of such a centralized database on health care. The national transplant waiting list should be eliminated within the first few years of the promotion. Transplant center physicians will be able to estimate by region the number of organs that will be available, allowing them to more accurately predict when a transplant patient could receive a donated organ—a timeline that will be measured in weeks, not years. Valuable time will be saved when first responders can access the database at the scene of an accident and notify the transplant center that they may have a donor. People who have been denied a spot on the waiting list due to age or other medical conditions will now have the opportunity for a life-saving transplant. Excess organs will be available for research needs. Medicare could save much of the \$17.8 billion it currently spends on dialysis. And there will no longer be 18 people a day dying as they wait for an organ.

The groundwork has been laid over the past 4 years, and the marketing team has been assembled. The next step is fundraising. The Donor Project initially needs \$600,000 to develop the marketing communications program, including broadcast, print, and online advertising, a website, direct marketing, and public relations. Then we'll need \$20 million a year to execute the ongoing marketing campaign, the majority of which we hope to raise from the drug companies that provide antirejection drugs. If we're successful, the market for antirejection drugs will double from \$900 million to \$1.8 billion. Preliminary meetings with several pharmaceutical companies have been promising.

The Donor Project will prevent the deaths of nearly 7000 people and extend the lives of more than 50,000 people every year. And, unlike other campaigns that raise money to find a cure, The Donor Project, by marrying willing donors with transplant patients, will instead *be* the cure.

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