

Transparency lacking in bombing victims' funds

Tough to be sure how much gets through

By [Callum Borchers](#) | GLOBE STAFF MAY 07, 2013

People giving directly to the One Fund Boston can watch their contributions pile up via a donation tracker on the group's website. But can consumers tell how much of their money gets to Marathon bombing victims when they shop at retailers pledging to donate portions of sales to the cause?

The short answer is often no.

While the intent may be honorable — and there is little indication that it is not — many retailers maintain a veil over the amounts they send to charity from fund-raising efforts tied to sales. Book publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, for example, plans to release an anthology of Boston-themed essays in October with net proceeds — “all revenue less production and distribution costs,” a spokeswoman explained — benefiting the One Fund. But Houghton Mifflin declined to translate its promise into a percentage of the sale price or provide a specific dollar figure per book that will go to the One Fund, saying it is too early to know.

The Yankee Candle Co. said it will donate to the One Fund all profits from its new “Boston Strong” jarred candle, but declined to specify how much of the \$27.99 purchase price will end up at the charity, also saying it is too early to tell.

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Music Festival headliner cannot disclose how big that share is because of deals with distributors like iTunes, which prohibit him from disclosing such information, a Chesney spokeswoman said.

Transparency is a critical element of fund-raising efforts, and consumer advocates, including Attorney General Martha Coakley, urge consumers to ask lots of questions about where their money is going and how much ends up at the charity before they make purchases or contributions. Shortly after the bombings, Coakley published a [list of tips for giving](#) to charities that claim to aid victims.

“Consumers have a right to be told how much of their purchase or contribution benefits a charitable cause,” said Marc Lavine, who directs the nonprofit track of the graduate business program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. “The public should expect this.”

At some businesses, the answer is straightforward. Custom T-shirt maker Ink to the People explained on its website that the company donated production costs for the first 1,500 Boston Strong shirts designed by Emerson College students Nick Reynolds and Chris Dobens, meaning 100 percent of the sale price went to the One Fund. For the rest of the \$20 tees, Ink to the People keeps \$5 to cover production, leaving \$15 — 75 percent — for the One Fund.

At Upper Crust Pizzeria locations this month, 5 percent of the sale price of Boston Strong pizzas (flavor combo: chicken, bacon, ranch) will go to the One Fund.

“So, for example, for every large pie sold, we are donating \$1 to the fund,” said Shawn Shenefield, Upper Crust’s director of operations.

The practice of selling an item and earmarking a portion for charity is known as cause marketing, and its effectiveness is a source of disagreement in the business world. Representatives of several companies engaged in cause marketing after the Marathon bombings said it is a simple yet powerful way for corporations and their customers to work together to aid victims.

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But research published in the Journal of Consumer Psychology in 2011 concluded that cause marketing reduces total giving because “consumers think of their purchase as a charitable act and decrease subsequent charitable acts.”

“Consumers may even think of the firm’s donation as theirs, since it is facilitated by their act,” wrote Aradhna Krishna, the study’s author and a marketing professor at the University of Michigan.

As an alternative to cause marketing, some companies are asking employees to solicit donations for the One Fund in the form of small amounts of money voluntarily tacked on to purchases at checkout counters — with all of the extra payments going to charity. CVS already has collected more than \$570,000 this way, mostly in \$1 and \$3 increments.

The collection method is easy and transparent, said Mike DeAngelis, a CVS spokesman — “maybe that’s why it’s been so successful.”

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