

What Shoe Salesmen Know that You Don't

How to Bless Donors and Fund Missionaries

By Shane Bennett and Jeff Beeson

Jeff Beeson, a successful businessman, and Shane Bennett, a full-time missions fanatic, are in hot pursuit of a goal: getting Shane fully funded. And they're writing a book about the process. In this article they wrestle over a key issue that hinders fund-raising, and they challenge both donors and fund-raisers to rethink their relationships and responsibilities.

Zappos.com Rocks

JEFF: "Hello?" My office phone's display shows it's my mom calling from her office nearby. "Did Ali-girl ever get any shoes from Zappos?" My mom had recently turned Ali, my twelve-year-old, on to Zappos.com, a web site with an unparalleled selection of shoes.

"No, not yet. But she's been looking."

"I just ordered mine the other day, and they're already here!"

She was delighted. A few minutes later she came bouncing into my office. "Look!" She handed me an amazing hand-decorated, personalized thank-you card from Corina, a customer service rep at Zappos.

"Wow, that's impressive."

"Tell Ali she's got to get some shoes from Zappos. They have great service, and if you don't like your shoes, you simply send them back!"

For a \$50 pair of shoes this lady took time to create an artistic thank-you card. In doing so, she created a connection with my mother that probably took her thirty seconds and the cost of postage.

This, my friend Shane, is what many missionaries don't do. Many, who every month receive from a donor more money than the cost of a pair of shoes at Zappos, never make a point to personally say "thank you."

SHANE: Hang on a second. Zappos does that because they want the next sale. I don't want to say "thank you" just to get the next check. That feels manipulative to me.

JEFF: Being grateful is biblical, right? Then take thirty seconds to say "thank you" to your donors in a personal way.

Raising the Bar

JEFF: Missionaries spend months or even years raising support to go to the field. After they arrive, they tend to ignore the flock they've just gathered to find a foreign flock to minister to. The missionary sends his donors and prayer supporters a monthly (or so) newsletter. But when this is the only form of communication, donors lose their sense of connection to the missionary — which makes it easier to drop the support when finances get tight. That takes us full circle: the missionary must come home to raise support again.

Let's go back to my mom's Zappos experience. After getting that note, she became a Zappos foot soldier. She enthusiastically encouraged my wife and daughter to go to the site. She checked to see if they had, retold her experience, and encouraged them again to log on.

What if, like Zappos, a missionary took a moment to say "thank you"? Wouldn't you love to generate that kind of wholehearted response from your donors? Missionaries should put ongoing effort into focusing on, caring for, and essentially ministering to their donors. I see very little of this.

SHANE: Well, from the fund raising side I can tell you sometimes it stinks to make a living by asking people to donate. If I really concentrate, I can think of fund raising as an opportunity to let people steward their gifts and participate in work that matters. But sometimes it feels like, "Hey, pal: Spare a quarter? I'm trying to get medical insurance for my kids and to reach this unreached tribe over here."

JEFF: That's just it, Shane. It's because that's what too many missionaries do. They simply ask for a financial commitment and then send a monthly newsletter.

SHANE: Besides saying "thank you," what else do you think we should do?

Share Goals and Accomplishments

JEFF: These concepts have really come together for me in the past few months. I think what I'm asking for is a personal and continual connection — a real partnership. (Get out your highlighter. This is the main point!) Missionaries must build partner relationships with donors by communicating effectively, sharing goals, and documenting accomplishments.

SHANE: Do you require such a plan of the missionaries you currently support?

JEFF: Not yet. But unless someone convinces me I'm wrong, I will as soon as we finish our book. I want them to read and think about it, to see where I believe our relationship needs to go.

SHANE: Paul seems to engage in this as he writes to various churches. In his letter to the Philippians he gets practically gushy about how he has them in his heart, how they're a part of what he's doing, how the gospel is going forward in cool ways.

JEFF: Exactly. And today we can connect personally to anyone anywhere in the world through a text message or an e-mail. It took Corina at Zappos thirty seconds to connect to my mom. Regularly communicating with donors helps missionaries avoid giving the impression they want to talk only when they need more money. Too many people I support give little indication they want anything more from me than money. There simply is no partnership.

I wish they would say, "Here are my goals. Here's where I want to be in three months, six months, and at the end of year one, two, three, four, and five." Later they can give me a quick call or send a post card or e-mail simply showing they're on track to reach their goals. Good communication makes it much easier for me to see the return on my investment.

Building Friendships

SHANE: What would the donor do for a missionary he supports in ... let's say ... Africa?

JEFF: Let me rephrase the question. What would a good friend do for his pal living in Africa? If the relationship were just missionary/donor, there'd be little ongoing interaction. But if he's my

friend, I'm going to stay in touch with him and he with me. If I had an increase in financial blessings, whom am I going to bless? And who's going to Skype me when my favorite team wins the championship?

Economics may increasingly play a role for missionaries. In a shaky financial situation, I think those who continually communicate with their partners will be less likely to lose support.

SHANE: I can sense some benefits in this approach. I'd hate for my donors to think I call or write them only to talk about money. But I'm afraid that's sometimes the case.

And, this approach does line up with my actual values, since like most mission-types, I believe people matter. The emphasis on connecting is a practical outworking of a deeply held value. I also see that giving back a little love helps release donors into the work God's given them. If financial and prayer support becomes more a joy than a drudgery (moving donors from duty to delight!), it's logical that more support will flow.

Jeff, you and I both want to see tons of workers released to respectfully invite all Muslim peoples to follow Jesus. No matter how you look at this task, it's going to take quite a bit of coin. If we include Hindus, Buddhists, secularists, and others, the price tag goes up — and so does the need for friends and partners.

Setting Expectations

SHANE: I've talked myself into following this approach. So how do we put it into action?

JEFF: Well, both sides of the relationship will have to change. Since I represent the donor side, I'll start with me. Sometimes I toss off a check to someone or to some project without following up. That's okay for some things. But if I'm a regular contributor to someone or some organization, I have a responsibility to them. I won't check in daily like I'm their supervisor, but I should have a sense of what our efforts are doing. We watch our stocks, don't we?

So donors need to ask for a plan, and the missionary needs to keep them informed. This should be what missionaries naturally do.

SHANE: Should donors base their future support on the completion of the plan?

JEFF: Not base support on completion, but on measurable, continued movement toward accomplishing the right goals. Stuff happens, and I'm not trying to set traps to catch the missionary in some way. I'm trying to create teams. Imagine how much more connected you'll be to your donors when they know your goals and can measure the effect of the money they donate.

SHANE: Cross-cultural efforts, however, often don't progress at the pace we'd like.

JEFF: Donors are not looking for a "gotcha" moment so they can drop a missionary. Someone giving to missions has a heart that seeks after God.

And donors aren't the ones setting the goals. The missionary gives their goals to us, and they should be realistic and attainable goals. If they don't seem reasonable, I might ask for clarification or simply choose not to support that person. A simple goal for a new missionary might be to meet one or two new people each week. Then after two or three weeks of meeting people, the missionary might have at least one person to his home each week for coffee. As time goes on, goals progress naturally.

SHANE: On one hand, I'm thinking how much of a hassle it would be to have donors "checking up on me." But I can also see how laying my goals out and demonstrating my progress toward completing them can help donors — and me.

JEFF: Certainly. And as a donor, let me add this. If you're accomplishing what you set out to do and your goals include projected increases in the amount you need to live, including items like a child's college fund and retirement, I'm much more inclined to increase my support when you hit those time markers.

SHANE: For those of us raising funds, I think we should keep a database that includes everything we know about our donors. At the least, it should include the family members' names, birthdays, and anniversaries. But it could also include their favorites of everything — teams, candy, songs — and any other information we can gather.

If the database tracked the communication we exchange, even better. This will come in handy when we reach information overload and it becomes impossible to keep the details of each donor separate in our brains. We need a tool like this.

Getting Started

SHANE: Let me take a crack at applying these ideas to people who raise short-term or project funds. Here are four simple steps.

1. Write a letter to everyone you know who loves you or Jesus or both.
2. In the letter, include a plan for what you hope will be accomplished in you and through you. Promise that you'll follow up with a report on what happened.
3. Write a personal "thank you" note to everyone who contributes.
4. Document your interaction with each person you write. (What? You think you'll never raise money again?)
5. Deliver on your promised report. Reprise the plan and tell how close you came to fulfilling it.

JEFF: If you're applying these ideas to long-term funding, here's how to start. Do the following tomorrow:

1. Get some full-sized cardstock and a packet of big colorful markers. Write "Thank You, John Smith." Make it colorful and artistic. If you aren't artistic, buy some nice cards. Then pick up a pen and tell your supporter how much you appreciate him, that you just read a stirring article on donor/missionary partnerships, and that you're going to send him a five-year plan with monthly goals.
2. Write your five-year plan. Include things like projected furloughs and increases in financial need. Make sure your first goal is attainable within three weeks. Then mail it to your donors.
3. Three weeks later you've met your first goal. Send a postcard or make a phone call telling your donors there's something you've accomplished.

4. Finally (this is important), connect with each donor at least once every three weeks. Make a plan for this. This connection can be a phone call, a personal note, a personal e-mail, an inexpensive gift, an update on your goals, or a video.

SHANE: Hang on a sec. If I do all this, I'm sure there'll be lots of warm fuzzies with my donors, but I won't have time for the work I'm raising support for in the first place.

JEFF: According to Zappos' sales people, it takes only a few seconds to show how much you care. Let's say you have one hundred monthly supporters. (You'd love that, wouldn't you?) If you spend thirty seconds on each one, writing a colorful, personalized thank-you card, how long would it take to connect with them all? Fifty minutes, math genius.

Now let's triple that time, because you need to buy or make the cards, address them, buy stamps, and get them in the mail. That's still less than three hours a month, or six minutes a day. What if you called each donor to ask him or her to check out on Youtube.com your last meeting, the one you wrote about in your plan? The calls, plus posting the video, could probably be done in four hours. What if you wrote a personal e-mail to each donor when his or her favorite football team won the big game? Shane, I'm really talking only a few minutes per donor every three weeks.

When I think about the partnership, the teamwork, this sort of approach can produce, it really seems worthwhile. Donors will be blessed and invigorated in their roles, missionaries will be funded at levels they've only hoped for — and new people will hear about Jesus.

And let's face it, the souls missionaries are trying to reach are much more important than the soles Zappos is trying to sell.

About the Authors



Jeff Beeson is a serial entrepreneur, president of Ason's Construction, Inc., and occasionally a missionary coach. Jeff and his family live in Muncie, Indiana. He can be reached at jbeeson@asons.net.

Shane Bennett has served in mission mobilization since 1987: advocating for missions by launching short-term research teams, teaching *Perspectives* classes, and speaking at churches. Shane coauthored *Exploring the Land*, a guide to researching unreached peoples, and has written numerous articles. After working in Europe for three years, he now speaks and writes for Frontiers, an organization focused on extending God's blessing in the Muslim world. He lives with his wife and five kids in Indiana. Learn more at www.jesusplanet.info or write to him at shanedar@gmail.com.

