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Scaling big in India: Leveraging behavioral science to help feed millions

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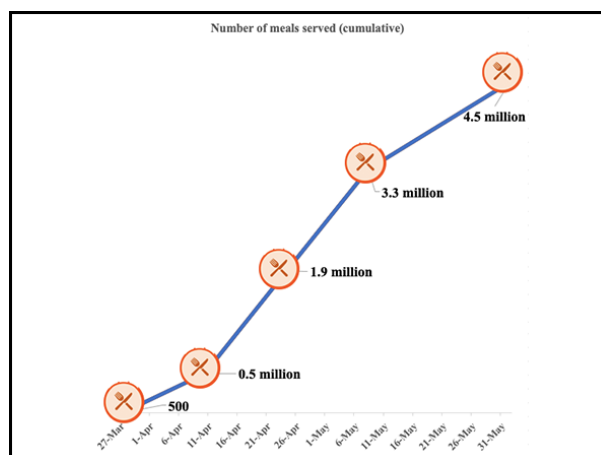
Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

Scaling

Scaling Big in India: Leveraging Behavioral Science to Help Feed Millions

A look at how a community kitchen initiative in India used insights from behavioral science to rapidly scale its services, delivering 4.5 million meals to homeless migrant workers even as the country instituted the world's largest lockdown to combat COVID-19.

By [Gita Venkataramani Johar](#), [Shilpa Madan](#) & [K. Ganesh](#) | Aug. 18, 2020



FeedMyCity, a community kitchen initiative in India, started in March by serving 500 meals to families of daily wage earners in one city; by June, it had served more than 4.5 million meals across five cities.

On March 24, 2020, millions of daily migrant workers fell under extreme hardship as India instituted the world's largest, most stringent lockdown to combat COVID-19. Overnight, life across the country came to a grinding halt. Left with no jobs, no other source of livelihood, and all transportation suspended, migrant workers faced starvation and had little choice but to begin backbreaking journeys—on foot, and with little access to food or water—from the cities where they resided to their rural hometowns.

The immense scope of need and urgency demanded collective action, and led to the formation of

FeedMyCity, a community kitchen initiative that

mobilized within three days of the lockdown announcement. The initiative had to surmount all the operational and logistical challenges social initiatives face even in normal times, plus many more. COVID-19 restrictions required that organizers not only obtain additional registrations and permissions allowing kitchen workers and food distributors to move during the lockdown, but also set up kitchens and distribution centers across multiple cities while practicing social distancing. It also meant mobilizing volunteers and donors to join the cause in a time of unprecedented anxiety and uncertainty. To scale up and make a tangible difference, the initiative had to organize and build without face-to-face contact—a **crucial** element of most social mobilization efforts.



Impact India

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FeedMyCity started in March by serving 500 meals to families of daily wage earners in one city; by June, it had served more than 4.5 million meals across five cities. How did this happen? To rapidly amplify its work and influence a large number of people to donate to the cause, the initiative drew insights from behavioral science to shape effective communications. While behavioral science has been applied in a variety of social contexts, FeedMyCity illustrates how certain principles can prove effective even in the most complex and constrained circumstances. We believe the following seven principles can help other entrepreneurs and individuals interested in spurring collective action and prosocial behavior.

1. Make Taking Action Relevant to a Core Identity

All of us want to believe and feel we are good people. **Research** shows that people are highly motivated to hold a positive self-image and willing to take actions that help them maintain and bolster this image. Thus, an effective way to inspire action is to create a link between the desired



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action, such as volunteering or donating, and the target person's self-image. In large field **experiments** run by the American Red Cross, donation appeals that highlighted a relevant facet of the potential donor's identity were most effective in encouraging participation. For example, the most effective appeal for existing donors focused on a previous act of donation, making "the donor" identity salient. The most effective appeal for new donors underscored their role as members of the local community, making the "responsible community citizen" identity salient.

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Linking donation appeals to people's identities also has another benefit. To motivate people to take personally costly actions—again, such as donating money or volunteering time—people must process appeals thoughtfully and carefully. In a world with acute attention deficit, **research** shows that identity-focused appeals cut through the clutter because they put the donor or the volunteer at the heart of the message.

FeedMyCity used this principle in its initial messaging by using the hashtag #NoOneGoesHungry. The hashtag message included both targeted individuals and others (“no one” includes all of us) and evoked the universally cherished value of generosity. Feeding a hungry person is also one of the most sacred values in India, across all religions. It has a special place in both Hindu mythology and Sikh practice.

2. Tailor Messaging to Local Areas

Given restrictions on physical outreach efforts, FeedMyCity ran its entire campaign digitally. It conducted extensive A-B testing in partnership with **PayTm**, India's largest mobile money network, and found that messaging focused on specific cities and neighborhoods within those cities (versus nationally) increased public donations.

Psychology and consumer behavior **research** shows that people not only seek out self-relevant information, but also respond to it more promptly and process it more thoroughly. Based on this, the initiative customized its name for each of the cities it was targeting—for example, FeedMyBangalore and FeedMyChennai. It also used geo-targeting to push locally relevant messages to potential donors. These messages, often shared via trusted community influencers, discussed how the initiative would use donations for migrant workers in the local area.

This localized approach also helped establish a new social norm of generosity and taking steps to solve an urgent problem. **Research** shows that communication about others who are similar to us doing good work is highly effective in encouraging pro-environmental behavior. For example, hotel guests who read a message saying that 75 percent of other guests used their towel more than once were 49.3 percent more likely to reuse their own towels, compared to guests who saw a generic appeal.

3. Make the Need Personal

Evidence consistently points to the fact that a person's individual plight is more likely to motivate donors than statistics. When 18-month-old Jessica McClure **fell down** a well in Texas in 1987, for example, donors gave approximately \$800,000 toward the rescue effort. Arguably, the same amount could have been used to provide preventative health care to hundreds of children. This is a

manifestation of a robust effect in charitable giving, called the “**identifiable victim effect**.” Specifically, identifiable victims inspire more generosity, because they are more vivid and certain, compared to statistical victims who are just abstract numbers and by definition, probabilistic.



Donate now : www.kvnfoundation.com/feedmycity

Quantifying the number of families different donation amounts could feed helped make donor impact more tangible (Image courtesy of FeedMyCity)

FeedMyCity’s social media channels posted daily national updates to highlight the number of meals served, both that day and since the lockdown started. (Image courtesy of FeedMyCity)

FeedMyCity leveraged this phenomenon to showcase the need of an individual migrant laborer. For example, one appeal highlighted a lone worker and a quote from Mother Teresa, “If you can’t feed a hundred people, then feed just one.”

4. Make the Impact Tangible

Feedback on the positive effect of contributions also motivates donors. Research consistently shows that highlighting the **impact** of prosocial behaviors increases givers’ perception that their contributions are making a tangible difference. Communicating specific details about a charity’s interventions (for example, “providing clean water to villagers in West Africa”) increases perceived impact and generosity, compared to communicating sweeping details (for example, “providing a broad range of aid to people across the globe”).

FeedMyCity leveraged this principle in two ways. First, it highlighted the impact donors could have on migrant families by donating as little as 120 rupees (about \$1.50). It also quantified the exact number of migrant laborer families that larger donations could feed.

Second, FeedMyCity provided frequent, often daily, social media updates on the number of meals served in each city, as well as nationally. It also often shared information on the cumulative number of meals served since the lockdown started, increasing the perceived impact. This let donors know

their actions were truly helping and increased trust in FeedMyCity's work, both of which increased actual donations.

5. Tap Into Emotion

Research also shows emotions are **contagious**. People tend to mimic or “catch the feelings” of others they interact with. Hence, using images with sad expressions may make donors feel more sympathetic to the victim's plight, which might increase their willingness to donate. Such emotional contagion effects occur without conscious thinking, so looking at sad images may help increase sympathy among donors by increasing their own feelings of sadness.

FeedMyCity found that stark images, as well as visuals with children and women were particularly effective in increasing attention and engagement on social media, as well as donations. Though unintended, these vulnerable pictures of hungry women and children on the road may also have generated other emotions, such as anger at their plight or shame at being unable to help. Interestingly, both these negative emotions are shown to be powerful drivers of prosocial behavior across varied contexts such as **getting people to vote**, as well as volunteer time and **money**.

6. Make the Message Social

Although negative content can generate action, positive content far outweighs negative content in virality. An **analysis** of *New York Times* articles published over a three-month period found that people were more likely to share positive, feel-good stories than stories that evoked sadness.

FeedMyCity was quick to share the initiative's success stories to create buzz and talkability. It also leveraged India's obsession with **Bollywood** by asking celebrities stuck at home to mobilize their millions of followers by asking them to share the message and donate to feed a hungry family. Both local and national celebrities endorsed the message, spread the word, and became associated with the initiative. Ordinary citizens who trusted these celebrities also came to trust FeedMyCity by virtue of being associated with and endorsed by well-known and beloved figures in India.

Finally, **research** shows that information people get from others close to them (friends, family, co-workers) influences them more than information they receive from distant others (such as acquaintances). FeedMyCity encouraged donors to share the message with their co-workers, college alumni groups, and housing communities to increase reach and impact.

7. Make Giving Easy

Finally, to convert people's intentions to donate into actual results, it's imperative to make the process of donation as easy and frictionless as possible. As Richard Thaler, Nobel Laureate in Economics aptly said, "Reduce the sludge." Specifically, if people need to jump through multiple hoops to donate, many won't ending up donating due to the extra effort involved. Requiring donors to give via a bank account, for example, involves an authentication process and adding the organization as a payee.

To make it easy for people to donate, FeedMyCity partnered with PayTM, a mobile payment platform used by more than 350 million Indians. This allowed people to donate with a single click on their mobile phones using the PayTM app. Donors could choose their city of choice by clicking on the "FeedMyCity" tab on their PayTM app homescreen.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great suffering, but it has also inspired extraordinary acts of innovation and generosity among many individuals and entrepreneurs. The lockdown in India caused unprecedented hardship for migrant workers across the country. To make a real difference in their lives, rapid scale up was imperative. Despite the massive problem and unique challenges posed by an extremely stringent lockdown, FeedMyCity succeeded by leveraging behavioral science to aid in resource mobilization in the most constrained circumstances. We hope others can use these insights in different contexts to encourage collective action and promote the greater good.

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Read more stories by *Gita Venkataramani Johar, Shilpa Madan & K. Ganesh.*



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