

CREATING A CHANNEL FOR DONORS TO REGULARLY SUPPORT COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS

Understanding donor engagement with giving platform ioby

ioby is a crowdfunding platform that enables people to give to local projects. Most users give to a single campaign, but indicate interest in finding other community-based initiatives to support. We worked with ioby to identify barriers to continuous giving through the platform to enable more people to channel their generosity toward local leaders and causes.

Summary

Since 2015, ideas42 has been developing tools to encourage more intentional, value-aligned giving and channel some of the attention and emotion of reactive giving to more playful actions. ideas42 teamed up with ioby to provide a behavioral science perspective to deepen ioby's understanding of the donors that give through their site as part of ioby's ongoing donor research effort funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

ioby is a unique platform that connects local leaders with donors and volunteers to support community-based projects.

These resources allow leaders to build real, lasting change from the ground up. But while donors are generously contributing to specific campaigns, few of them give to multiple crowdfunding projects on the ioby website—a lost opportunity for leaders and donors alike when there are many other crowdfunding projects on the ioby site that could be of interest to donors. As a result, we sought to explore whether behavioral design could **help users maximize their generosity by supporting another crowdfunding project on ioby.**

While most donors to crowdfunding projects on ioby only donate to a single campaign, many of them are active givers to other charitable causes, indicating broader generosity and desire to give.¹ However, within the ioby platform, their engagement with the site tends to be limited, leading to missed

About ideas42

ideas42 is a non-profit that uses insights from human behavior—why people do what they do—to help improve lives, build better systems, and drive social change.

About ioby

ioby stands for “in our backyards,” but it also stands for taking care of each other, for civic participation, and for trusting neighbors to know what’s best for the neighborhood. ioby’s mission is to mobilize neighbors who have good ideas to become powerful civic leaders who plan, fund, and make positive change in their own neighborhoods.

The ioby crowdfunding platform connects resident leaders with support and funding from their communities to build real, lasting change as they make neighborhoods stronger, healthier, greener, more equitable, more sustainable, and more fun.

¹ Based on a 2020 survey of previous donors

opportunities to support community-based projects. They are only exposed to campaigns they have existing connections to, such as knowing the organizer or someone else active in the project. This preliminary evidence points to an opportunity to expose donors to more ioby campaigns, cultivate their connection to a broader range of projects, and encourage additional donations.

Working closely with the ioby team, we applied our behavioral methodology to uncover what psychological or contextual barriers may prevent donors from giving to multiple projects. We then used these findings to develop a set of solutions aimed at removing the most critical impediments to giving and tested one idea in a lab setting to measure its potential impact on donor behavior.

Understanding the donor experience

To paint a fuller picture of the ioby donor experience, we conducted baseline research that included taking a closer look at ioby engagement data, reviewing the user experience on the ioby platform, and revisiting behavioral science literature about charitable giving to seek out applicable findings from the field. Based on the information gathered about the giving context on the ioby website, we identified both channels and barriers to repeat donations to crowdfunding campaigns on ioby. We grouped our hypotheses about repeat donations into three main categories:

- ▶ **Validation:** Donors have difficulty judging the merits of other projects fundraising on ioby
- ▶ **Mental model of ioby:** Donors view ioby through the lens of a single campaign and not as a platform for additional charitable giving
- ▶ **Emotional connection to a project:** Donors tend to support projects to which they have a strong connection (e.g. through the leader or project team, their neighborhood, or the cause's issue area).

Exploring and testing our hypotheses

Through a survey² and interviews with four ioby donors we asked targeted questions to better understand how an ioby donor's sense of validation, mental model, and connection to a project may influence their decisions to support another project on ioby. The research provided an opportunity to refine our hypotheses based on direct answers and concrete examples of the ioby donor context, ultimately helping us design better solutions. We have included some of our key research findings and updated hypotheses below.

Validation is important

- ▶ *ioby supporters don't have a way of easily validating the merits of other projects (e.g. knowing if another project will be well-run)*
- ▶ *ioby supporters form confidence in projects through their own experience or through social connections (e.g. recommendations, knowing the leader)*

We found that the majority (67%) of survey respondents reported being "very" or "extremely" confident in the project they supported, while only 34% reported this level of confidence in the quality of other

² n=352

projects. This divergence supports our thinking that donors may find it challenging to assess the merits of other projects on the ioby website. **One potential source of validation could be referrals**, as 56% of respondents reported being “very” or “extremely” interested in supporting another project that was recommended by someone they trust. **Other sources of validation for users could be matching funds or indications of community support.** When asked about project characteristics they would expect to have the most positive results for the community, the top two responses were a project with matching funds (32%) and a project completely funded by the community (31%).

“I look for people I know / people I’ve heard of that have a good reputation for following through on their commitments and getting things done. I would also look for substance of the project and whether it looks realistic and whether it’s meeting community needs that I know about.”

—ioby crowdfunding project donor

Mental models may be limiting engagement

- ▶ *ioby supporters who have already given to a project don’t consider using the ioby platform when thinking about making new donations because they only associate it with the previous project they supported.*
- ▶ *ioby supporters see engagement with ioby as a one-off way to donate to a specific project rather than a place to go to learn about projects and make donations*
- ▶ *ioby supporters (especially first-time donors) don’t understand or recognize ioby to begin with, so they never return to it as a way to support additional projects*
- ▶ *Leaders of projects on ioby and supporters see ioby as a fundraising platform geared toward crowdfunding; not a giving platform geared toward donors*

Survey and interview results supported the notion that donors typically do not engage with the ioby website in an exploratory or discovery mindset. The majority (62%) of respondents reported visiting the project page they ended up donating to on their last visit to the ioby website, and only 16% said they had ever gone to the ioby website to look for a project to support (without having one in mind when they begin their visit on the site). From these responses and conversations with interviewees, it felt additionally clear that most donors typically visit ioby only to support a specific project.

“[When making a donation] on ioby, it feels more individual and relationship-driven vs. non-profits feels more mission-driven”

—ioby crowdfunding project donor

“I just don’t think enough people on this side of the country even know, the awareness is not there (about ioby).”

—ioby crowdfunding project donor

We also **saw some indication that there is an openness and interest in donating to additional projects on the ioby site.** Forty-two percent of the survey participants reported considering donating to another project on the ioby website (suggesting an intention-action gap), and 62% reported donating to other community groups, nonprofits, or charities “regularly throughout the year.” This expressed interest in donating, and overall generosity of ioby project donors, led us to believe that there may be

opportunities to capture the donors' attention and show them opportunities to support other community-based projects.

Connection to project facilitates generosity

- ▶ *ioby supporters often first give to an ioby project because of a sense of reciprocity to a personal connection*
- ▶ *ioby supporters donate to a geographically close project because they have an emotional connection to their neighborhood*
- ▶ *ioby supporters value being involved in their communities, and donating to an ioby project is one way to do that*

We asked survey respondents to indicate what characteristics of projects would make them most interested in supporting another project on ioby. We found that 89% of individuals reported being at least “interested” in **supporting a project recommended by someone they trust**, 88.2% of individuals reported being at least “interested” in **supporting a cause/topic they are passionate about**, and 85% of individuals reported being at least “interested” in **supporting a project led by someone they know**. Another characteristic of interest was geographic proximity, with 75% of respondents reporting being at least “interested” in **supporting another ioby project in their city**. Other characteristics, like the project having matching funds (matched by ioby and local partners), or being a new project, garnered less interest. This indicated to our team that a social or emotional connection is one of the most important factors in deciding whether to donate to a project on ioby.

It makes sense, then, that the top three ways that donors we surveyed found out about the project they supported was through a social connection—29.3% by knowing the project leader, 23.7% from a (non-ioby) social media page, and 17.6% learning of the project from family or friends. Similarly, our interviewees noted that they viewed ioby as a platform that fosters community connections.

“I also see it as a way that people in the community can cross paths, who might not necessarily meet, but they have a shared interest in gardening. And then they can interact while they do it. Human connection is important, especially now that we’re isolated—people are looking for something to connect with.”

—ioby crowdfunding project donor

“I remember thinking it would be really good to get people involved in the communities where the recipients are because they seem very specific local projects that maybe somebody who lives in that community could get interested in.”

—ioby crowdfunding project donor

Designing to enhance the ioby experience

In close partnership with the ioby team, we developed a set of behaviorally informed solutions that directly address the barriers we identified by changing key elements of the donor experience. Through our design process, we selected five ideas that were feasible to execute and that addressed the behavioral barriers we identified:

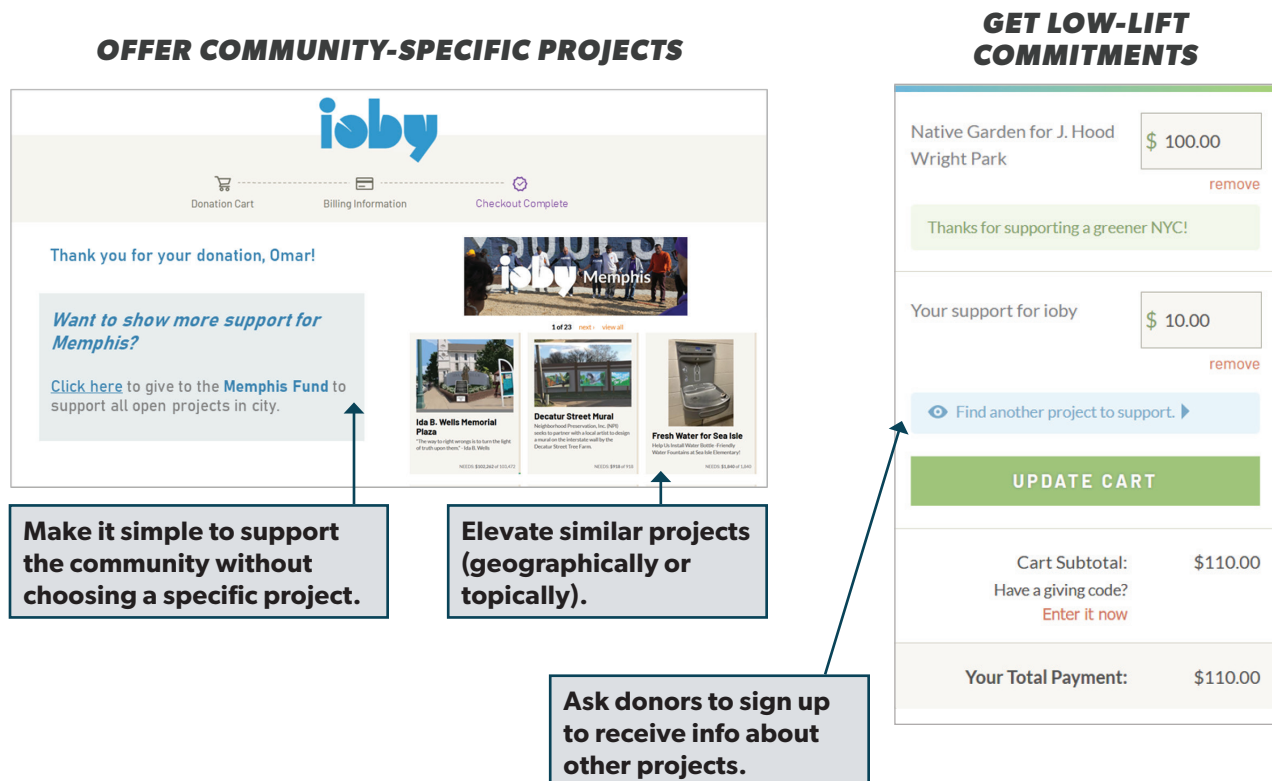
- ✓ **Validation:** the design helps to instill confidence in donors that other projects raising money on ioby have merit and will make a difference,
- ✓ **Mental model of ioby:** the design helps to broaden donors' understanding of ioby as a community-focused crowdfunding site by encouraging discovery of other projects, and/or
- ✓ **Connection:** the design reminds donors of their feelings of connection to the project's leader, cause, or location and shows them other projects that resonate with them.



DESIGN IDEA: Highlighting other projects

Donors should be asked if they are interested in donating to other, specific projects right after they complete a donation.³ This type of prompt will signal to donors that ioby hosts a range of potentially worthy projects at a moment when the donor is already thinking about their giving. The recommended projects could be selected to match one or more dimensions of the campaign the donor just funded to make the recommendations relevant, and the additional donation can be streamlined using the information the donor just entered to simplify follow-through.

There are many ways this approach could be executed, including showing additional projects on the “thank you” page or adding a checkbox as part of the checkout flow where donors could subscribe to learn about similar projects, or even make a small donation to a city-specific fund.



³ Removing hassles from the donation process encourages participation (Rasul and Huck, 2010) and reminding people of their past behavior as a donor (Kessler and Milkman, 2014) or their identity as a generous person (Kraut, 1973) all lead to increased donations.

**DESIGN IDEA:****Launch a “Give Local” campaign**

A “Give Local” campaign should be run in conjunction with a broader fundraising appeal (like Giving Tuesday) to signal that ioby projects are a valid option for donors to consider supporting. As it stands, even previous donors to an ioby campaign may not include ioby projects in their choice set when making future giving decisions. A deliberate campaign could address this issue by explicitly requesting that donors consider ioby projects while they are thinking about giving more generally. A campaign like this would also be an opportune moment for ioby to showcase the benefit of locally-run projects to help donors update how they view and approach their charitable impact. To test the concept, a Give Local campaign could be piloted in an ioby City Action Strategy Team (CAST) city, where they have a strong community presence and dedicated staff to back the effort. A Give Local campaign could include:

- ▶ Clear campaign goals so donors feel like they are part of something bigger.
- ▶ Match funding available during the campaign to bolster interest and confidence in ioby projects.⁴
- ▶ Community-based channels for amplified messaging (such as neighborhood newsletters, flyers, social media) to foster feelings of connection.⁵

**DESIGN IDEA:****Encourage discovery through matching funds**

ioby should offer match funds for more projects that donors could use to support a different campaign on ioby. In our survey, 32% of respondents indicated that they would expect a project with matching funds to have the most positive results in the community—an indication that matching funds are a way to validate a project’s merits. The match itself creates a moment of choice for the donor—either they discover another project to support or let the funds go to waste. Donors who choose to use the match will be exposed to a broader view of how ioby projects serve communities across the country and they may begin to see ioby as an effective platform for supporting local change (with future gifts).⁶

To limit the cost of the program, the match could be limited to a fraction of the original donation (e.g., 10% of the original amount). And to support follow-through and create a smooth experience, ioby could present a guided selection process to curate other projects, based on information they already have on the donor.

⁴ Offering limited time matches in the lead up to Giving Tuesday has been shown to increase overall giving (Castillo et al, 2018).

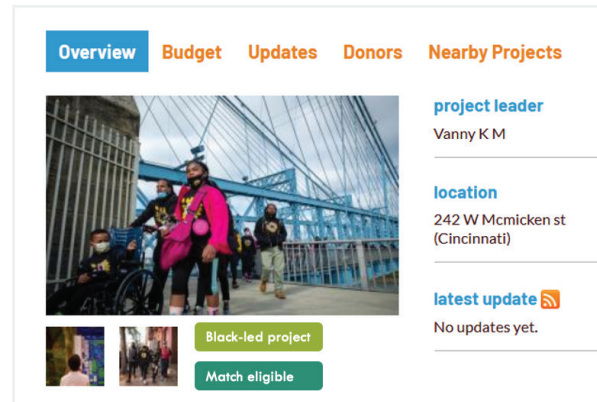
⁵ Research has shown that people like to support people who are similar to them (Burger et al, 2004), so by highlighting commonalities, donors may be more likely to donate. Additionally, revealing similarities between current and prospective donors has been shown to increase the average donation amount (Croson and Shang, 2011).

⁶ In a natural field experiment, sharing that a major supporter is matching donations increased the donation rate and average donation amount. Showing that ioby is willing to support the crowdfunding projects on its site could have a similar effect.



DESIGN IDEA: Providing cues to consider other projects

On project pages and as part of their search features, ioby should create tags for projects to help donors navigate campaigns more easily. These tags could relate to the leader, the project's funding status, or engagement with the project page (e.g., "Black-led project," "match fund eligible," or "trending/hot project").



This design works well for both ioby project pages (like the example shown here) and for search results. Since most visitors to the ioby website typically only visit a specific project page, this could capture their attention and encourage discovery on the ioby site. ioby could also leverage this design by offering a fund for donors to support that benefits all projects within a tag, or they could present other similarly tagged projects on the donation checkout page.⁷



DESIGN IDEA: Curating and validating projects

ioby should offer dedicated "leader" pages that host all the projects (both current and past) of a single leader or group. This model could work particularly well for locally-based mutual aid groups that may run multiple concurrent projects led by different leaders. Grouping projects in this way may better align with how donors explore opportunities since connection and networks are such crucial factors in determining whether someone will support a campaign.⁸

A comprehensive leader page could provide an indicator of trust and validation by showing donors a track record of success. The pages could also help extend the existing trust a donor has in a leader to all of that leader's projects, which may otherwise go unnoticed. This design idea is bolstered by the fact that 85% of our survey respondents said they would be "interested," "very interested," or "extremely interested" in supporting another project led by someone they know. Examples of what this design could look like can be found in the following section.

Testing our ideas

We took the first step in testing one of these concepts by designing a lab test around the "leader page" idea. We conducted an online survey on Amazon Mechanical Turk in March 2021 of 900 users. From this test, we hoped to learn about the design's desirability, and whether showing a leader page offered additional validation for users, compared to generic search results or a project page organized by location.

⁷ Removing hassles from the donation and discovery process would help encourage participation and donation to additional projects (Rasul and Huck, 2010).

⁸ In addition to removing hassles and reinforcing a donor's connection to the leader they previously supported, a leader page would also give donors a feeling of agency to direct their next donation towards another project they feel connected to, but still within a limited choice set so as not to be overwhelmed. Research has shown that giving individuals agency to direct donations led to higher average donation amounts (Eckel et al. 2017).

First, we showed all test takers the mockups of a hypothetical project page and asked respondents questions about their likelihood to donate and confidence that the project would have its intended effect. We then randomized the test takers into three groups for a second set of questions. One group saw a mockup of a leader page (“all Samantha M. projects”), one group saw these projects organized by geography (“projects in Springfield”), and one group saw a mockup of the generic ioby search results page (“Browse projects”), again with the same projects featured. We then asked questions to try to understand whether these different pages influenced feelings of validation and connection to the projects, and to assess respondents’ mental models of ioby.

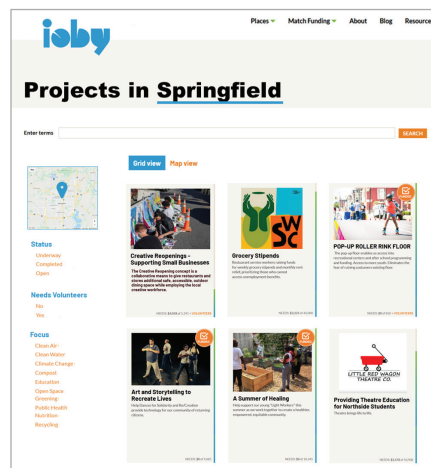
Project page



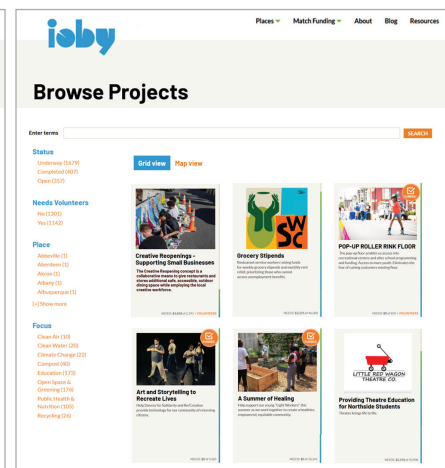
Leader



Geography



Browse projects



Promising findings around validation and mental models

We found some promising initial results that leader pages are a way to increase feelings of validation and expand donors’ mental models of ioby. Additional research is needed to optimize the design.

► **Leader pages may bolster feelings of validation**

We wanted to understand whether seeing an additional page with other crowdfunding projects changed respondents’ confidence in the effectiveness of the initial project they viewed. **Respondents that saw the leader page as their second page felt more confident in the effectiveness of the first project (45.7%), compared to those who saw the geography page (32.6%) or those who saw the generic**

search results (34.6%).⁹ This result suggests that leader pages could indeed be a way to boost validation and confidence in other ioby projects. We recommend additional testing of leader pages to further understand whether leader pages could increase confidence and spur additional donations.

➤ **All three pages helped to broaden mental models**

To learn more about how respondents view ioby, we asked them to select the two phrases they felt best described ioby after reviewing the screenshots. The results paint a relatively **consistent picture of how respondents interpreted ioby's mission. Across all three groups, the top result was that ioby is “a platform that enables people to improve their communities.”** ioby's crowdfunding functionality was also a feature that was prominent in respondent's mental model of ioby—“a platform for fundraisers to post their projects” was in the top three of all three groups. By offering easy ways to browse other projects (such as a leader page or local projects page) after visiting a specific project page, ioby can conveniently show donors other ways to support their communities and expand donors' understanding of the ioby mission.

ioby is a platform...				
Condition	Leader page		Geography page	
	Browse projects page			
Most popular response	...that enables people to improve their communities	43.4%	...that enables people to improve their communities	47.4%
Second most popular response	...to support projects that will make a difference	42.7%	...for fundraisers to post their projects	34.1%
Third most popular response	...for fundraisers to post their projects	40.1%	...to browse different projects in my town	33.7%
			...to support projects that will make a difference	36.4%

Percentages show the proportion of users who selected the response within each condition

➤ **Connection can be better understood through field tests**

We also hypothesized that seeing a leader page would give donors a greater feeling of connection to the projects. To understand feelings of connection, we asked respondents how interested they were in learning more about one of the projects listed and how relevant the projects feel to them. We did not observe statistically significant differences between the three groups. A lab test presenting a list of hypothetical projects is likely not the best context for understanding whether donors feel connected to the projects they are viewing. **We recommend further testing feelings of connections to other ioby projects through field tests on the ioby website and by collecting feedback from ioby users who view and donate on these pages.**

⁹ This difference is marginally statistically significant ($p=0.1$), using ANOVA to compare the mean change in confidence of the three different groups (leader page, geography page, and browse projects page).

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK: Personal Connection, Mental Models, and Validation

Our investigation into ioby's donor behavior further confirmed a few key channels and barriers to donations to additional projects crowdfunding on the ioby website. Our primary research (through a survey and interviews with ioby donors) emphasized that donors typically support projects on ioby to which they have a strong personal or geographic connection. Two chief barriers to repeat donations are the lack of a strong mental model of ioby as a platform they can return to to support additional community-based projects, and difficulty validating the merits of other projects on the ioby website. Our designs seek to address these channels and barriers, and in an initial lab test of one of these designs, the leader page, we saw promising early results that these pages could increase confidence and feelings of validation in other ioby projects.

By designing ways to encourage exploration and deepen engagement with additional crowdfunding projects on ioby, we hope donors will find value-aligned projects to which to give, and think of community-based efforts like projects on ioby when making their plans for charitable giving. Continuing to understand these three dimensions (personal connection, mental models, and validation) will be an important undertaking for ioby as they continue to serve leaders seeking to make a difference in their communities.