



Reflecting on new ways to thank donors

Think Thank : Bruno Danic (author), Olivia Briat, Odile Martin, Cécile Guyot de Saint Michel

The EFS Social Lab draws on knowledge in the field of human and social sciences to devise action plans for improving the donor experience at Établissement français du sang (EFS, French Blood Establishment) sites. The EFS Social Lab Papers outline the results of its studies.

This second edition focuses on blood donor recognition. How should it evolve in line with the new expectations of donors? In order to increase their motivation and loyalty, should donors be given more information about the use of their donation, for example by informing them when and where their blood will be used?

1. DONOR RECOGNITION : TAKING STOCK

Donors have been given official recognition for some time now

In France, blood donors were officially recognised for the first time between the two world wars. Particularly deserving blood donors were promoted in the media by the Department of Health itself. During the Second World War, blood donation was free in most Western countries and was highly praised by the media as a patriotic act.

After the war, when the need for blood transfusions exploded in the civilian population, paving the way for new medical and surgical advances, **France opted for a system that favoured free, voluntary donation**. As far back as 1950, social recognition of blood donation was introduced by ministerial decree dated 11 February that year. A «**specific blood donor diploma**» was issued in recognition of the highly valued, selfless devotion of voluntary blood donors to the civil health services. This diploma, issued by the Minister of Public Health and Population, bears testimony to donor recognition by the Republic of France. **This recognition system, which has been regularly adapted since then, is still in force today**. It has, however, lost its republican symbolism. But the link between blood donation and these values continues to permeate official speeches and the collective memory, and likely still makes sense for a part of the population.

Free donation is now enshrined in legislation and ethical codes

The principle of voluntary, unpaid donation is enshrined in various elements of French and European Union legislation. Article 16.6 of the Civil Code stipulates that: «No remuneration may be granted to a person who consents to an experimentation on himself/herself, to the removal of elements from his/her body or to the collection of products thereof». Nevertheless, the French Public Health Code indicates that the donor may receive «tokens of recognition» as well as «refreshments following the donation» or the reimbursement of transport costs, based on the costs actually incurred as opposed to a flat-rate basis. The donor may also be granted paid leave by his/her employer to cover travel and collection time.

The ISBT (International Society of Blood Transfusion) code of ethics states that, «any form of incentive likely to influence the reasons for donating blood should be actively discouraged and must be prohibited if it impacts on blood safety, results in exploitation of the donor or creates unequal access for recipients. The World Health Organization (WHO) uses the concept of «financial neutrality», which stipulates that donors «should not experience any financial benefit or loss from the donation.»



Find the interview with one of the authors of the report, Doctor Bruno Danic, Director of EFS Bretagne
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Different recognition practices in different countries

A report published by the European Commission in April 2016 shows considerable diversity in terms of donor compensation and incentives across the EU, depending in particular on the average purchasing power of a given country. **As in France, most countries offer refreshments as well as small souvenirs (badges, T-shirts, pens, cups, etc.).** In half of European countries, donors can take time off work and travel expenses are reimbursed, sometimes at a flat rate.

Dutch sociologists provide a psychosocial explanation for this European diversity. It appears that financial incentives are mostly rejected in Europe, probably because they tarnish the donor's reputation and the value of the gesture, which appears self-serving. However, this negative connotation is mitigated if the social norm towards financial incentives for blood donation tends to be positive in the given country. Thus, financial incentives to donate blood were turned down by 90% of the French participants in the survey, compared to 40% in Bulgaria. The granting of leave increases participation in donation in countries where this practice is deemed

acceptable. Conversely, this approach has little effect. The national view of the practice therefore tends to influence the effectiveness of the measure and its application from one country to the next.

Other types of incentives are used in Europe and around the globe. Donors can receive financial incentives such as cash payments or tax reductions. Non-financial incentives are also commonplace, such as lottery or show tickets, health check-ups or time off work or school.

Incentives appreciated by donors

Studies conducted to establish the donor perception of these incentives show that **those of a non-financial nature (such as a health check) or a low-value incentive (e.g. a cinema ticket) are welcomed.** In countries where they are employed, financial incentives are mostly approved by donors (less by non-donors) and by young people (less by older people). In countries where donation is unpaid, incentives are desired by only a very small proportion of donors.

Based on donor statements, the effectiveness of these incentives is limited. Only donors in paid systems recognise payment as an

important incentive for donation. The influence of non-financial incentives is discussed in relative terms by donors everywhere. While such statements may be partly biased, they are nevertheless consistent with many analyses expressing the view that donation essentially equates to a selfless act. For example, the introduction of a cash payment leads some voluntary donors to stop donating (e.g. in Australia).

As a general rule, incentives appear to be ineffective in recruiting more donors, but relatively effective in promoting loyalty. However, further research appears necessary in order to assess the acceptability and effectiveness of certain measures such as the reimbursement of transport costs or the option of donating to a humanitarian organisation, which have not been investigated in any depth in academic research.



3 QUESTIONS TO ONE OF THE AUTHORS OF THE REPORTS, THE DOCTOR BRUNO DANIC, DIRECTOR OF EFS BRETAGNE

Why focus on the subject of donor recognition? Why is this subject important for EFS today?

Dr Bruno Danic: The issue of blood donor recognition is an integral part of voluntary, unpaid donation. Donation is one of the hallmarks of altruism. Reflection on behaviour devoted to others emerged with the advent of the political economy and market developments in the early 19th century. Frenchman Auguste Comte defined the concepts of 'altruism' and 'sociology'. For decades, questions were raised as to whether altruism was a truly selfless act. In the early 20th century, Marcel Mauss published his study on donation/giving, and confirmed two concepts that are still used as references to this day. Giving lays the foundations for social bonding. However, giving is not pure and gratuity is never absolute. When interviewed, donors do not voice any expectations in terms of recognition. Nevertheless, we know that giving equates to pleasure and satisfaction. We also know that the expression of gratitude by the recipient increases or prolongs these emotions. Donor recognition expresses this gratitude. It is all the more important because it is carried out not only in the name of an anonymous recipient, but also in the name of society. As the public organisation responsible for collecting blood, EFS should express this gratitude.

Nowadays, EFS can express donor recognition in a number of ways. How is this recognition perceived? What impact does this recognition have on donor loyalty?

Dr Bruno Danic: We can distinguish three levels of recognition: the attentive relationship with the collection teams at the time of donation, transparency in the use of the donation, and finally a more general level of recognition by the community and its representatives. This is the civic and republican aspect of donation. Donation to a stranger, especially when done on a regular basis, is not based on the same incentive as paid donation, or replacement donation triggered by a family transfusion requirement. As with

most pro-social actions, donors deny that they expect any recognition. The reality is more complex. Acknowledging that they expect a return on their donation would distort it. The recognition must therefore come from the recipient, or in the case of blood donation, from the intermediary organisation. However, it is difficult to demonstrate that signs of recognition encourage the return to donation and increase loyalty. Conversely, it has been shown that negative experiences, primarily donation refusal, can have a negative impact on return to donation. Recent publications have attempted to assess the effects of certain actions. A study conducted by the Red Cross, for example, demonstrated the positive effect of performing a metabolic health check-up at the 3rd blood donation. An Australian study, meanwhile, confirmed the positive effect of sending a post-donation SMS to virtually coincide with the use of the donated blood. This form of recognition, which also demonstrates the transparency of the institution, is developing in many countries.

How will this reflection process continue? What will be the follow-up to this report?

Dr Bruno Danic: This report corresponds to a specific request. Further to the announcement in increased plasma requirements and following a report by the Court of Auditors calling for reflection on how to reimburse the expenses of plasma donors, President François Toujas referred the matter to the EFS Ethics and Professional Conduct Committee, which is currently reflecting on these sensitive issues and is expected to make its recommendations in due course. The report on blood donor recognition was written to heighten this reflection. A second report was then requested by the Innovadon steering committee to focus the work on messaging donors post-donation and to inform them of how their donation was used. Based on EFS Social Lab recommendations, an experiment was conducted to accurately assess the effectiveness of this approach in France. The Innovadon sub-programme pilots are now devising new ways of displaying recognition in line with today's society.



Reflections on donor recognition in France

In October 2017, philosopher and former vice-president of the French National Consultative Ethics Committee, Pierre Le Coz, and former director of the ANSM (French National Agency for the Safety of Medicines and Health Products), Dominique Maraninchi, published an article in *Libération* suggesting that methods of «symbolic remuneration» should be considered to make blood donation more appealing: «Without abandoning the rule of anonymity, we can encourage identification and empathy by providing some non-identifying information about recipients (age, profession, illness, etc.). This personification approach would satisfy the need to personalise generosity outside of anonymous and standardised collective frameworks».

In 2018, EFS conducted a qualitative donor survey as part of the Innovadon project (derived from «innovation» and «donation») which seeks to modernise and improve the donor experience. The donors interviewed initially put their expectations in terms of recognition into perspective, like this donor from La Roche-sur-Yon: «When I give my blood, I know it will be put to good use. I don't

need to be told when it has been used. I give for the simple fact of giving. I don't expect anything in return.»

The survey also highlighted the fact that **the current recognition system, based on a system of diplomas and small gifts, was criticised by the younger generation.** They point to the lack of environmental responsibility in terms of diplomas and goodies. Like their elders, they also highlight the cost of this approach, the usefulness of which is questionable. However, these «gifts» seem acceptable to them if they encourage giving, which they accept is one of the key factors.

Today, every new donor receives a thank-you letter from EFS in the days following their first donation. A donor card is sent after the second donation. In some regions, other forms of recognition are sent to the donor: SMS or an email to thank the donor after each donation or only after a visit to a specific blood drive, a telephone call after the initial plasma donation, etc. However, these measures were not assessed in terms of effectiveness either before or after their implementation.

2. SHOULD EFS INFORM DONORS HOW THEIR BLOOD DONATION IS USED?

An increasing demand for transparency in society

Information on how the donor blood is used also **responds to a growing demand for transparency on the part of users and consumers**, as well the personalisation of social and commercial relations, sometimes extending to a quest for individual narcissistic gratification. Without challenging the ethical basis of blood donation and what it involves, these changes in society call for a review of the ways in which donors are recognised. They also emerge in a context of increasingly competitive humanitarian demands using social marketing techniques to express these expectations. Donors become accustomed to personification of the potential recipient through the use of storytelling in advertising campaigns, particularly in the humanitarian field.

Various studies shed light on **a lack of knowledge or information among donors about how blood donations are used.** This may pose an obstacle for non-donors who do not necessarily perceive just how useful donation is. Among donors, the desire to maintain direct proximity with the recipient, in a sort of «shoulder to shoulder» relationship, in order to attribute meaning to the act of donation, may

be overshadowed by the medical technicality of transfusion. **Informing the donor on how their donation has been used could accentuate the usefulness and humanitarian aspect of the donation procedure, thereby boosting motivation.**

The idea of sending such a message by SMS, raised during a qualitative study carried out by the EFS as part of the Innovadon project, arouses enthusiastic interest from young donors with an average age of 25 («I was thrilled to receive a thank-you SMS after donating blood on campus. I felt like a hero in my own way») or reinforces the idea of how useful it is to give blood («We are always told that 'EFS needs blood', but we don't really know why, for whom or when»). More experienced donors and members of voluntary blood donor associations offered more contrasting opinions («When I give my blood, I know that it will be put to good use. I don't need to be told when it has been used. I give for the simple fact of giving, I don't expect anything in return»).



3. WHAT WE LEARN FROM HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES ON THIS TOPIC

Sending an SMS: an effective channel for EFS communication

Studies in psychology show that receiving an SMS fuels the recipient's desire to receive more messages. Indeed, receiving a message triggers unconscious pleasure, linked to dopamine release. Consequently, SMS messages have a good open rate (around 99%) within a short period: 90% are read within three minutes of receipt.

Research has also shown that SMS has significantly positive effects on various health behaviours, for example on self-management of diabetes or smoking cessation.

They therefore seem to be a good channel to inform donors about how their donations have been used.

Information on donation end-use: an initial study by EFS

The EFS Normandie teams experimented with sending letters to donors to inform them about the usefulness of their previous donation. **These messages increased the likelihood of a swift donor return.** In this study, two types of messages were tested, one focusing on the usefulness of the donation behaviour («Your previous donation

was a useful and necessary gesture») and the other recalling the social value of donation («Your previous donation is a testimony of your generosity and sense of sharing»). The first type of message proved to be more effective in motivating donors to return. However, this finding is age-relevant with older donors seemingly more sensitive to the message regarding the social value of donation. Among under 30s, the impact of the message is weak, regardless of content, which suggests that other media should be considered to reach this target.

Foreign experiences of sending SMS texts on the end-use of the donation

In several countries, SMS messages have been sent to donors to inform them of the end-use of their donation and have been assessed.

Positive effects associated with sending this type of message

In Sweden, SMS messages informing donors about the use of their donation were introduced in 2010. Swedish donors receive a message like this: «Thank you! The blood you gave on [date] helped a patient». The message is

generated when the donated blood bag is used for patient transfusion. The Swedish blood agency has noticed that donors share these thank you messages on social networks, which helps to promote blood donation. However, no scientific assessment has been carried out to determine the impact on donor loyalty.

A similar system was introduced in the United Kingdom in 2016 with a message giving even more specific information to the donor: «Thank you very much for your donation on [date]. Your donation has just been delivered to hospital [name, town/city]. Every donation counts». Again, sharing on social networks was noted, but also positive feedback from donors, which accentuated the forging of a personal link between donor and recipient.

In Senegal, where a similar programme has also been launched, the project combines two messages: a thank-you message sent immediately after donation and a reminder message three to four months later. According to the project designers, donations to the Dakar blood centre have tripled since the pilot programme was launched.



Australia replicated the Swedish system in 2015. The scheme has been scientifically assessed and published. A large-scale test was conducted in the region of New South Wales. SMS thank-you messages with the following content were sent to donors who had not made an appointment for a future donation: «Hello [first name], your blood donation has been used! Today, your blood was sent to save lives at the hospital in [location]».

At twelve months, **the likelihood of returning to donate increased** by 49% among donors who received a text message, raising the return rate for all donors from 62% to 70%. With regard to new donors, the likelihood of return even increased by 73% with SMS. The return to donation of all new donors increased from 43% to 56%. Nevertheless, the SMS sent did not bring back more experienced donors (those with at least ten donations to their credit). However, **the interval between two donations was shortened among donors who received an SMS.** The procedure has since been rolled out across Australia.

The authors suggest **several ways in which the efficacy of the SMS** could be interpreted in order to encourage a return to donation:

- The SMS may serve as a **reminder** to the

donor to make another appointment.

- Another option is remote reactivation of the «**warm glow**» (i.e. feeling good about oneself) experienced by the donor after donation. This is known to be a key motivation factor for return.

- The SMS can also boost motivation by giving the blood donor explicit **recognition**. Experiments have shown that such an explicit expression of recognition has a positive impact on repeat donations to non-profit-making organisations. This is directly linked to the positive emotions experienced.

- Ultimately, apart from recognition, the content of the SMS emphasises the need for and importance of the donation. It provides clear-cut **evidence** that their donation has been put to good use. The authors of the study suggest that personalising the end-use of the donation may have been a key element in its success.

More sceptical studies on the efficacy of such messages

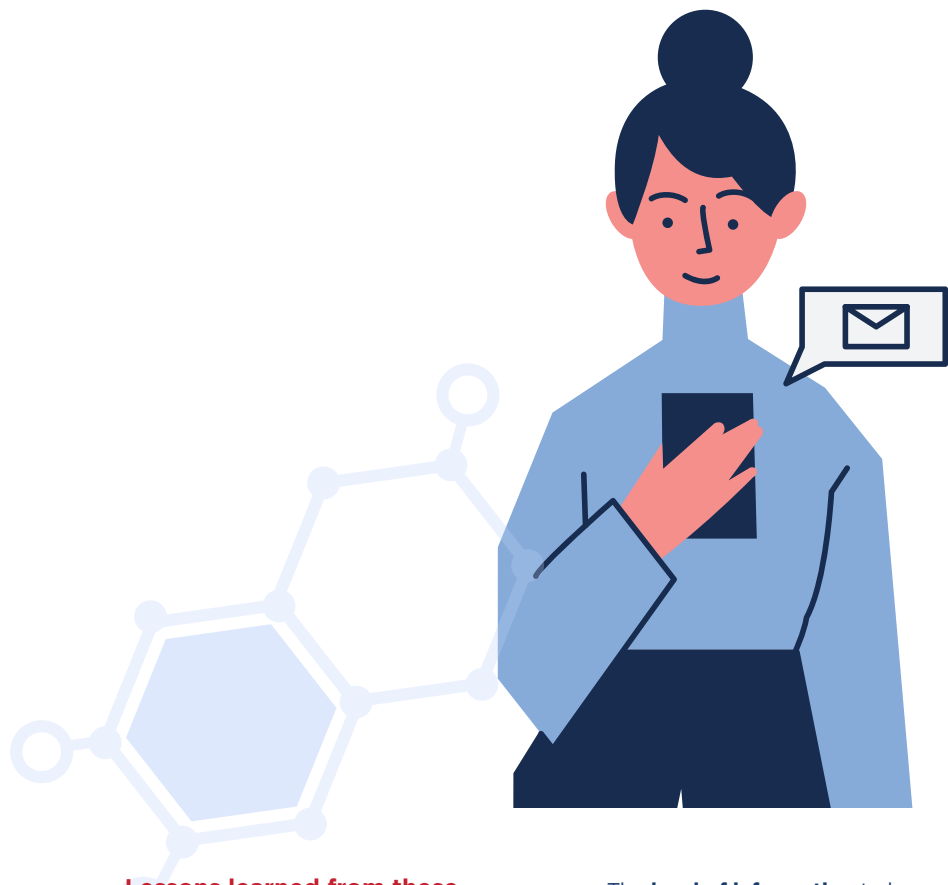
A Swiss team challenged the Australian results. The Swiss researchers conducted a randomised study (with a control group not receiving SMS), which the Australian researchers did not. In the Swiss study, an SMS thanking the donor for their donation and informing them that their blood was ready to be used to help a patient was routinely sent 7 to 10 days after the

donation. The SMS was less personal than that used in the Australian study as it did not mention the location of the transfusion on confidentiality grounds. Hence, all donors received a message, even if their blood was not actually used.

The rate of return to donation for those who received this SMS was 62% compared to 60% for the control group. **The impact of the SMS was therefore verified but negligible.** Furthermore, none of the donors who received an SMS had shared it on social networks. 50% had shared it with their relatives and 50% had not shared it at all. **Donors who received the message confirmed that they experienced positive emotions**, although the authors were unable to measure the impact on the return to donation. No negative emotions were reported.

Apart from this study, other research encourages **further assessment of the potential negative collateral effects of these initiatives.** For example, if the delay between donation and use of the blood is a few weeks or more, donors may conclude that the blood supply is much larger than they previously thought and feel less motivated to donate in the future. Similarly, if a donor never receives notification that their blood has been used, they may permanently lose their motivation to donate.





Lessons learned from these studies

Ultimately, these studies show that **thanking donors following donation** triggers positive emotions associated with the act of donation, thereby enhancing the donor experience. This finding is mentioned in several testimonies in countries that have investigated this approach, and is corroborated by the studies in Australia and Switzerland. Nevertheless, **the effectiveness of the message in terms of boosting the return to donation**, and therefore loyalty, is less apparent. Contradictory conclusions on this subject can be drawn from both the Australian and Swiss studies.

The impact on a viral effect via **social networks**, often mentioned by professionals who triggered this action, is not borne out by academic research.

Finally, the **choice of medium**, namely SMS, is consistent with our knowledge of the effectiveness of this medium: immediate impact, exhaustive reading, ease of sharing.

Questions to be asked before introducing this type of system in France

An SMS containing post-donation information should follow several rules. In terms of message content, **recipient anonymity must be guaranteed** in accordance with the ethical principles of blood transfusion. Other ethical questions arise concerning the SMS message:

- The **level of information** to be sent to the donor in order to convey a clear, comprehensible message;
- The **truthfulness of the data** to ensure that the donor's confidence in EFS is never damaged;
- The **negative emotions** that could be aroused in the donor on receiving the message (anxiety or guilt if the information is not conveyed after the donation or during the pre-donation interview);
- The possibility that the donor will **look for more detailed information** about the recipient;
- **The fact** some donors, whose blood has not been used in a patient blood transfusion, **will not receive an SMS**.

In addition, the legislation imposes several principles to be respected when sending an SMS, such as the right to unsubscribe or messaging at certain times. Although this type of message would not fall within the scope of marketing SMS to which these rules apply, they should apparently be applied in order to forge quality relationships between EFS and donors.

The possible gradual reliance of the donor on SMS messaging should also be taken into account (i.e. negative impact on return to donation and increased requests from EFS teams in the case of no message) alongside a complex rollback without prior information to the donor.



4. ACTIONS RECOMMENDED BY THE EFS SOCIAL LAB: EXPERIMENTING WITH SMS INFORMATION ON DONATION END-USE IN FRANCE

The EFS Social Lab recommends the following in order to send donors information on donation end-use:

1 Promotion of SMS due to its efficacy and low carbon footprint.

2 A clear definition of the desired objective and selection of an appropriate personalised message.
Three messaging levels are possible:

- Level 1: to rekindle a positive emotion with a simple thank you
- Level 2: to increase the donation return rate by personalising the message with specific information (date and/or place of use) and sending the message when the donation is used
- Level 3: to show recognition by EFS via an appropriate message when the donation cannot be transfused to a patient, thus being transparent about the potential non-use of a donation.

The EFS Social Lab recommends that messages be sent to all donors, unless they object. Indeed, thanking and informing people about the use of donation products is a new form of recognition, and there is no reason to select one category of donor.

3 Conduct a qualitative donor study to assess their expectations, the level of information they would like to receive, their perception of the messages under consideration and the emotions likely to be aroused depending on the type of message conveyed.

4 Carry out a preliminary pilot study on a significant randomised donor cohort.
This study is scheduled for 2022.



WHAT IS THE EFS SOCIAL LAB?

The EFS Social Lab is the French Blood Establishment's system for listening to society and donors. Its mission is to improve knowledge of donors, people likely to donate or to impart or share information on blood donation by drawing on human and social sciences, and conducting donor surveys. It recommends actions to be taken to expand the Innovadon programme, which seeks to create a new donor experience, build on donor retention and to recruit new donors.

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