

When a happy birthday wish on Facebook turns into a request for donations

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As if you needed another way for technology to feed guilt.

Now tech is making it easier to stick a virtual hand out—and into your

wallet—for tips and gifts you might not have planned to give. A pervasive one starts with two seemingly innocuous words: happy [birthday](#).

Consider Facebook: You start your day by dutifully tapping out "happy birthday" wishes for friends on the social network. What once was a simple, kind gesture of letting folks know you're thinking of them on their special day has become an ask—to mark the occasion by making a [monetary donation](#) to a cause they've chosen.

This is where the struggle starts. Sure, you could ignore the request and offer the person your birthday wishes just the same. After all, you hadn't really planned to send a gift anyway. Or perhaps you're just not moved by the cause. But, you think, it is an easy way to honor your friend and make a difference beyond piling on to the well-wishing deluge that's now become fairly routine.

Really, all you wanted to do was take a minute to wish happy birthday and move on, and now you're fingers are twitching with this moral dilemma because this is multiplied by however many connections you have in the social network. (This makes making a [phone call](#) or sending a card look so much simpler.)

From birthday wishes to bigger tips

Whether it's a ringing bell outside a supermarket, a heartbreaking photo on a mailer or a tear-jerking commercial, charities have always tugged on our guilt strings to get us to give. Wrapping the request inside [social media](#) through a friend makes it, at least some of the time, that much harder to simply swipe by.

Another way tech is changing how generous we are—or are being asked to be—comes in the form of tipping.

You ask for the check, and, instead of a paper bill, the server hands you an iPad. In addition to your balance due are suggested tip percentages.

You're not stingy and, of course, have every intention of leaving a tip for good service. But maybe not quite as large as the amounts those buttons on the tablet screen prompt.

"I so often today see checkout interfaces where the tip choices are 20%, 25% and 30%, whereas a much more common range would probably be 10%, 15% and 20%," says Gabe Cohen, a spokesperson at Candid, an organization that shares information on nonprofits and the work they do.

For sure, you still have a way to leave a custom (read: smaller) amount or no tip at all. But it takes extra steps, and all while your server lingers and, perhaps, watches.

There's that guilt thing again.

"We used to be able to tip very discreetly—write it out, close the booklet and slide it across," says lifestyle and etiquette expert Elaine Swann. "Technology has changed that transaction and made it very public," increasing the social pressure.

Her advice: Tip the way you always did, based on the quality of the service.

"Regardless of whether the person is there with the iPad and it's really bright and the numbers are screaming at you, and your table mate can see—we have to own what we tip," she says.

Much of this upgraded tablet tipping is an extension of the shift toward cashless transactions. But the flip side of that transition is that you may end up stiffing that super friendly barista at the coffee shop you would

have previously dropped some coins or a bill in the tip jar for since, well, you don't carry cash anymore because there's an app for that. (But don't fret, just look closer. There's likely a predefined tip option in the app as well.)

A billion-dollar birthday gift

To be clear, no one is arguing that you shouldn't be generous when the situation calls for it. Technology makes it easier to pay, share, research and donate to worthwhile causes, and that is more good than bad. Which brings us back to Facebook birthday donations.

Through its giving tools, Facebook has raised more than \$2 billion for nonprofits and personal causes since 2015, half of which came from the birthday fundraiser program, which launched in 2017.

Facebook also lets vetted nonprofits add a "donate" button to their posts, pages and live videos. Such buttons are available to nonprofits on Instagram, too, and Facebook also recently launched donation stickers for Instagram Stories.

(Facebook says that 100% of what's raised on Facebook for nonprofits, including donate buttons, and birthday fundraisers, goes directly to the benefiting organization.)

"We're really supportive of anything that's going to lead to increased donations to charitable causes," Cohen of Candid says. "But we recommend that people don't give reactively, ever. If someone propositions you to give to a cause, take a step back and think about is it the right type of organization, is it a cause that matters to you, is there a level of trustworthiness that reaches a place where you feel comfortable giving the gift."

The intimate nature of Facebook can make the ask a bit jarring for some.

"It seems odd to transform birthday greetings into a transactional event," says New York writer Frank Vizard.

Transactional or not, Kelly Reeves, who founded a non-profit Paw Prints in the Sand Animal Rescue, urges those annoyed by being asked to get past it. "All someone is trying to do is help in what little way they can, but to us, it means the world. No one is forcing you to do anything."

While it's a choice, having a personal connection can make a difference to make you click for the cause.

"I prefer to give, and will give generously when someone I know is directly involved with the place for which they are fundraising," says Rebecca Gertsmark Oren, a former PR executive in Westport, Connecticut. She reads the backstory behind standalone requests on Facebook and appreciates that any incremental increase in giving to a charity is a win for the organization.

She raises funds on the social network for Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center—her husband is a two-time cancer survivor. "It's the one time a year that we ask for donations, and I find that both friends and distant Facebook acquaintances support the cause very generously."

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