



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

A season of giving

Charity Navigator website helps guide potential donors to intelligent gift giving

Giving and receiving gifts is a big part of the Christmas season. Young children peruse toy catalogs as they make out long wish lists for Santa. Families pull names out of hats to select gift recipients. Secret Santa gift exchanges are organized at workplaces. Cash registers ring like sleigh bells as people purchase presents for their loved ones.



KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites

Unfortunately, not everyone has financial security, a stable family life or even a job. So in addition to getting gifts for family and friends, many people also make donations to charities this time of year in order to

help the less fortunate among us.

Solicitations arrive in the mail, companies run charity drives and bell-ringing Santas seeking donations man the entrances to shopping malls. With so much need, and so many seeking help, how do you know where your donations will have the greatest impact?

Celebrating its 10th year in operation, the website **CharityNavigator.org** is devoted to analyzing the effectiveness of nonprofit charities. The site is itself a nonprofit organization, with a stated mission of "guiding intelligent giving."

American, nonprofit

Charity Navigator evaluates United States-based organizations that are considered public charities. Donations to the charities they rate must be deemed tax-exempt by the Internal Revenue Service.

Ratings are based on comprehen-

10 of the best well known charities

Donors can feel confident that these charities put their donations to good use. Score is out of 70.

Charity	Score
1. Direct Relief International	69.9
2. Teach For America	68.8
3. The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International	68.6
4. Scholarship America	67.9
5. The Carter Center	67.2
6. The Conservation Fund	67.2
7. National Christian Foundation	67.0
8. National Fish and Wildlife Foundation	66.4
9. National Jewish Health	66.3
10. Smithsonian Institution	65.6

SOURCE: CHARITYNAVIGATOR.ORG

sive analyses of two broad areas — financial health; and accountability and transparency. The operators of the site plan to add a reporting of a charity's results as a third category in the near future.

The site uses federal tax forms filed by charities as well as comparisons of performance with similar charities to analyze a group's operations. Some of the financial information reviewed includes program expenses, administrative expenses, fundraising expenses and fundraising efficiency.

A charity's accountability and transparency is determined by reviewing tax records and information that charities make public on their websites. The theory is that organizations with transparent operations are less likely to engage in inappropriate behavior.

Charity Navigator classifies organizations into nine broad categories that are subdivided into more specific causes. For instance, Environment is a category with two causes — Environmental Protection and Conservation; and Botanical Gardens, Parks and Nature Centers — listed under it. This is done so potential donors can compare similar groups when trying to decide where to help.

Shoot for the stars

Clicking on the name of a category on the home page takes you to a page with descriptions of the related causes. There are alphabetical lists of charities linked to each cause. Each charity is given a rating of up to four stars. The star system is based on a complex equation that assigns points for various criteria. Clicking on a charity's name takes you to a page with a detailed analysis of its operations.

The site has several sections designed to help viewers research charities. A search field lets you look up charities by name. There are numerous top-10 lists, such as top-notch charities, celebrity-rated charities and most-followed charities. A Holiday Giving Guide offers tips to potential donors. Tips and resources, featured charities, articles, a blog and a hot topics section also are featured on the home page.

The design of the site is text heavy but organized and intuitive to use. It's very functional, with no bells or whistles. What the site lacks in style it makes up for in substance. Helping people help others is a wonderful gift for all.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.