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# Hail the fundraising *faux pas*

Recently my friend Harvey McKinnon in Vancouver sent me a news clipping from the brilliant UK fundraising website [www.fundraising.co.uk](http://www.fundraising.co.uk). This relayed to its readers an item originally reported on the ultra-dependable BBC (news often comes to me in roundabout ways), under the headline

## **Error hits Greenpeace donations**

It went on to explain that a computer error had left about 10,000 UK supporters of Greenpeace out of pocket by hundreds of pounds, because some members who make regular direct debit donations, ranging from £2 to £10 a month, had been charged a hundred times their usual amount.

A glitch had led to two zeros being added to every donation.

Greenpeace, the report went, took swift action to reimburse those affected, assuring them that any resulting bank charges would be paid too. A spokesman for GP UK said, 'The only people who will be out of pocket are us.'

A tale for our times, perhaps, illustrating the perils and pitfalls of our modern computer-dependent age. But, I found myself thinking aloud that, if I know anything about donors, the 'out-of-pocket' bit is very unlikely to be true.

I recalled an earlier incident with Greenpeace, when they appealed to their supporters for funds to meet the costs of a court case they believed they were doomed to lose. The anticipated sum that they expected to have to fork out was £250,000. Greenpeace donors responded generously (this mailing was also remarkable for the fact that, when creating the appeal for funds, a bright spark in the creative department of my agency Burnett Associates suggested that alongside the usual direct mail prompt boxes for £20, £50 and whatever, we should include a prompt box for £250,000; it seemed a zany idea, but one donor did give £200,000). Greenpeace did lose the case on a point of law, but the judge felt that they had the moral high ground so awarded costs to the other side of just one penny. Having raised a lot of money that wasn't needed for the purpose, GP did the only honourable thing and offered donors their money back. Only six took up the offer (and we know where they live). The guy who gave two hundred big ones wasn't among them.

So, it can pay if things don't go quite to plan.

Harvey came back with his own tale of woe from his distant past. Some years ago, he relayed, the Ontario region of Oxfam Canada sent out a house package to donors. The mailing house forgot to put the letter in the package and – embarrassingly for the Ontario region – the package raised just as much money as it would normally do at that time of the year. The mail house’s compensation for the screw-up covered a lot of Oxfam’s mailing costs, so the package made a higher profit than had the letter been enclosed.

One wonders, could we not dispense forever with the fundraising letter? The question should be asked.

Another fundraiser once goofed by sending every donor on his list three identical copies of the same mail-pack. Undeterred by any notions of over-contact he wrote to the whole file again apologising for his carelessness, explaining that he’d been distracted because he was playing God in his son’s school play. Instead of concentrating on getting his charity’s mailing right his attention was elsewhere, on this much larger role. His donors showed they loved his honesty and directness by sending more than twice the normal volume and value of responses, with lots of messages of affection and warm wishes for his evidently more promising career in the theatre.

Legends of mailing *faux pas* abound. Writing to whole files as ‘Dear Major Donor’, or even, once, ‘Mr Reg. Charity’, seldom seem to suppress response. But though I’m not sure what happened when a nonprofit of my acquaintance addressed Prince Rainier of Monaco as ‘Dear Mr Prince’, I do know that they seriously upset a certain Miss Fishpool by leaving the final letter off her surname. So you can’t win them all. But even giving cause for complaint can lead to more funds raised. Research by the Worldwide Fund for Nature showed that donors who complain and are satisfactorily responded to will become your most loyal donors of all.

My friend Fricker gets irritated by fundraising and particularly by telemarketing calls, so her tale of a fundraising *faux pas* interested me. In whiling away a polite time one evening before faking a cry from the kitchen to rescue her family’s spoiling dinner, Fricker was only half listening to the disinterested tele-fundraiser from a conservation charity when she heard the drawling nasal tones of her caller refer to the charity’s projects in a country called, apparently, Attabonayo.

Now Fricker knows a thing or two about geography and was particularly keen to find out more about this place, of which she’d never previously heard. So she pressed her caller to enlighten. ‘Oh yes’, she was told, ‘it’s our rainforest project, right next to our orang-utan project, in Attabonayo’.

'Oh' queried Fricker gingerly, 'I think you mean the Heart of Borneo project, don't you?'

'Yes', said the youthful caller, as if addressing a cretin, 'that's what I said. Attabonayo.' Fricker assures me she took out a regular monthly gift in deference to this charmingly naive caller's sheer optimism in continuing.

## The way forward

Thinking that maybe I'd stumbled on to something and that instead of honing our professional skills at seminars and conferences we should maybe be learning the art of the foot in mouth, as the Italians say of the deliberate error, I contacted a few pals to see if they could share a similar experience or two.

Quick as a flash, this tale came back from Mal Warwick.

'My colleagues and I worked with the remarkable Senator Paul Wellstone during the last ten years of his life. We knew him well and were intimately acquainted with his personal quirks, which included a strong aversion to asking his supporters for more than the most modest sums of money, and a volcanic temper.

'During one of our last campaigns for the Senator, we persuaded his staff to permit us to build a monthly giving programme. We decided to jump-start the programme by appealing to all but the highest-level donors to enrol as monthly givers or contribute single gifts equivalent to a full year's monthly payments. Our intention was to dramatise just how much impact a single donor could have through monthly giving.

'Well, it didn't work out that way. Somehow, somewhere, a computer technician confused the programming. The result was that tens of thousands of \$25, \$30, and \$50 donors were asked to contribute \$300 or \$600 each. The monthly giving programme got lost in the confusion. We learned of this error only after more than 50,000 such letters had been mailed.

'We recognised that this error could result in A) massive complaints to the campaign, including B) many directed personally to the Senator, which would result in C) a display of emotional fireworks unparalleled in US political history. Although my unwavering policy has always been to confess any errors before a client might hear about them from other sources, we decided to forgo the practice in these unique circumstances. In effect, we all decided to crawl into a hole and hope that

the crisis would somehow blow over.

‘Well, you’ve guessed what really happened. The response rate was substantially higher than we’d projected and the campaign was flooded with \$300 and \$600 cheques. The average contribution – well over \$100 – was twice what we’d projected. The appeal raised nearly three times what we’d hoped for and set a benchmark we were never able to surpass. There were virtually no complaints, and if anyone said a word about our chutzpah in asking for so much money, the Senator never mentioned it...’

So there you have it, from one of the world’s doyens of direct mail fundraising. The secret of fundraising success is to blunder. Screw up right royally and your results will shoot through the roof.

Readers of *Contributions* are invited to send me their own examples of fundraising *faux pas* to prove or disprove the theory. There’s no reward, other than perhaps a modest amount of fame if we retell your tale in these columns. And you never know, there may be another article in it for me, if I’m lucky.

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