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# Postal pollution

## Is yours junk mail, or something better?

According to an oft-quoted survey conducted a few years back jointly by the leading British newspaper *The Sunday Times* and respected researchers National Opinion Polls, the thing that most upsets the normally phlegmatic, unruffled Britisher is not one of the obvious trials of everyday life such as voice mail, other people jabbering on mobile phones, useless hand-driers in public toilets, or even car alarms going off at dead of night. It's not even reality TV shows, or Joey Tribbiani's new soap series.

It's junk mail. Inappropriate, unsolicited, irrelevant mail is life's biggest irritation for us UK types. This postal pollution, the pollsters tell us, is what most infallibly gets up the collective British nose, by a big margin. But mysteriously the typical reply from the average Brit to life's biggest irritation isn't to complain, threaten action, or change address, it's to do...well... precisely nothing. Inertia. When swamped by that which we really loathe, it seems the British response is to suffer stiff-upper-lippedly in silence. But of course, there are always exceptions to prove this rule.

My wife, Marie, has been writing letters of disapproval again, this time to purveyors of junk mail and I'm a bit anxious because at least two national nonprofits are in the frame, so I'm expecting a bit of heat. As if to confirm the pollsters, what gets up her nose is, in her words, '... cheap and tacky enticements to give, masquerading as "thank you" gifts for things I haven't done.' (This latter included voicing opinions on preserving ancient woodland which, despite not being a bad person, my wife just doesn't hold and certainly hasn't shared.)

The guilty parties this time are two well-known and well-respected causes, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Woodland Trust. They've been caught red-handed including identical free pens in unsolicited mailings that looked suspiciously as if both emanated from the same factory. This already volatile situation was compounded by the fact that neither pen works.

But is it fair to condemn fundraisers for such practices? In today's grab-grab world, is what they do so bad? I feel Marie may have been a tad harsh on these good folks, who after all have to make a living.

So when she accuses me of complicity in this sordid practice I offer her my standard riposte, which is, 'Even if their pens don't write, their approach must work with enough people to be worthwhile, because they keep doing it.' She replies 'Well it doesn't work with

me' as if that's all there is to it.

But instead of just ignoring them or deleting them from her Christmas list, she sends them a caustic letter.

I should add that Marie gets just as annoyed about junk email. She claims to spend half her day clearing out junk from our mailbox and the other half deleting unsolicited emails. This made me wonder what kind of company people like my wife must imagine that we fundraisers keep. I tell her it's not junk, it's valuable communications. For some people.

I've just had an email from a friend in Holland called Bente (who I can't really remember). Anyway he says I've won \$100 million dollars on the Dutch software manufacturers free monthly prize lottery. Which is nice. And, in fact, something of a relief, as I could do with some ready cash at the moment.

In part this is because a delightful woman called Princess Kiki Jessica C. Spiff, daughter of Chief Oti Spiff, the late king of Ogoni, wrote to me from West Africa just the other day asking for my help with a fundraising project she has on just now, something to do with transferring major donor funds to safe offshore havens. Given that fundraising is such an international profession with all sorts of opportunities popping up in out of the way places, I was only too happy to oblige and send her my bank details and pin code plus a pile of dollar bills up front, so she could find a safe home for her dear donors' funds.

And now there's those nice folks at the World Country Bank who, in the interests of national security, have collected my account details even though I bank with a different outfit entirely. How very civil of them.

RSPB and the Woodland trust may feel persecuted by my wife's apparently severe dismissal of their carefully constructed blandishments, but I'm sure they'll get over it and return to mail another day (they've just had one irate letter, but think about this, I have to live with her). And I'll try to explain to Marie once more that fundraising is really a noble and honourable profession but that competition for donors' money is so hard these days, it's not surprising that fundraisers sometimes have to stoop really quite low to raise it.

'I mean', I can hear me pleading, 'be reasonable. It's not as if the public is likely to be confused and think we're all as bad as each other, are they?'

Sometimes people can be so unfair...

Here are two examples that show it doesn't have to be like that.

## Putting books into the right hands

I'm a recent addition to the board of a tiny British nonprofit, BookAid International. Their mission is to work with the UK and international publishing industry to direct appropriate books, tapes and DVDs to information-hungry nations in Africa and other parts of the developing world.

BookAid is peopled by charmingly bookish types with names such as Julian and Carmelle, surnames like Ponsonby and De Vere-Worthington. If they had such a thing their brand character might be a dust-laden Dickensian bookshelf piled high with appropriate, enticing, even high-tech-tomes packed with the information a developing nation needs to get ahead.

In looking to repair their fractured finances BookAid's fundraising department has devised a really rather appropriate and involving proposition that's bringing in new donors by the sackful. It's called the Reverse Book Club. In return for a modest monthly fee (about eight US dollars) BookAid will each month send out three books. But you won't get them. Instead, they'll go in your name to where they are needed most, in Africa or South Asia.

It's a simple proposition, but highly appropriate. And donors love it. Joining the Reverse Book Club is easy too. Email me and I'll sign you up.

## Lost dogs find the key to donor happiness

Any actor will tell you it's a kiss of death to perform alongside either animals or children. Any fundraiser knows that an appeal for big-eyed children will only be bettered by one thing, and that's an appeal for big-eyed cuddly pets. And of all critters in the pet species, the pooch stands supreme champion, the non-pareil of fundraising images. So you might think, The Lost Dogs' Home (great name, I'm already figuring how I can give them money) of Melbourne, Australia starts in this fundraising game at a considerable advantage.

Maybe so. But less than two years ago this same Lost Dogs' Home had just 12,000 active donors, their four annual appeals raised just Aus\$ 400,000 (that's about US\$300,000) and their database was in decline. They had less than 100 regular givers. But they did have a belief in and a commitment to that extraordinary group of people, their donors.

They also have former RSPCA vet and passionate advocate for animals Dr Graeme Smith as their CEO. Remarkably for someone in that role, Graeme has found he really enjoys fundraising and has taken to it like a duck-billed platypus to water (that's smoothly, but firmly). In his words, when he joined it the LDH was 'a bit of a financial basket case'. His trustees inferred it had just six months of life left. Then Graeme started to be nice to his donors (at its

heart, that's all that relationship fundraising is; not enough to fill a page, far less a book). Now the LDH is Australia's largest animal shelter, has 80 staff and last year had an income above \$7 million.

From the start Graeme wrote personal handwritten notes to thank donors. As the file grew this became increasingly difficult but by then its value was clear. Graeme still writes to as many donors as he can and devotes a huge amount of time to it, often of an evening while he's sitting in front of the telly. Donor development demands dedication - Graeme often sleeps over in his office, to get his work done.

But more than hard work, developing donors also requires entrepreneurial spirit and the willingness to take a risk. Two years ago, when the Home's finances were looking particularly sick, the agency advising LDH suggested a 'crisis' appeal (ie, more serious than just a mere emergency). The appeal they sent was carefully and cleverly worded to bond donors even more closely to the cause they love. It worked staggeringly well, generating a 55 per cent response with gift averages of \$88.00, nearly three times more than usual and exceeding the target by more than 300 per cent. The top donors, those who get Graeme's hand-signed Christmas cards, responded at an incredible 87 per cent.

This extraordinary achievement, however, wasn't the result of mere random generosity. It was made clear that this crisis called for extra sacrifice. Each donor was asked for a specific aspirational amount, 50 per cent more than their previous highest gift. The letter was brilliantly worded, different for each significant segment.

Graeme Smith sets great store by knowing his donors and knowing what they are thinking. Their views and opinions are regularly sought on a variety of relevant issues. Thus donors' attitudes to animal welfare issues are now at the heart of LDH policy. He knows that trust and confidence in the organisation are paramount, so the personal, open, honesty approach pervades all of the LDH literature. That's also perhaps how and why nearly 15 per cent of donors have indicated that they wish to include the Home in their wills. And why LDH's chief executive sees his main priority as 'finding more time to devote to our donors and supporters'.

If only all fundraisers would follow his example.

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