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Where fundraisers are going wrong

How we are failing to meet the needs of our donors

In my last article I made the claim that marketing was a mistake, for all fundraisers. I suggested we should switch the current fundraising/marketing paradigm to a new fundraising/communications paradigm. Here are five ways where, I believe, fundraising marketers are communicating in ways that no longer meet the needs or wishes of our donors.

1. We so rarely get it right when we write

An old hobby-horse of mine, but still true. The standard of communication from nonprofits (as mainly evidenced by the mail that floods through my London door) is desperately poor. I know there are instances of good, even great, fundraising communication. But as a collector of these, it has to be said they are rare, very much the minority.

What I'm sent tends to be segregated into two main piles, the dull, and the tacky/potentially offensive. There isn't enough of the rest to form a pile. I'm not going to go into detail here as most readers will be familiar with what comes through their own doors, but I wanted to tell you of one that arrived for my wife a few days ago. It was a cold mailing, a large brown parcel trumpeting URGENT ANIMAL EMERGENCY. The emergency, it transpired, was the level of cruelty to animals that persists in Canada (ie no emergency whatsoever) and the request was to help campaign for new legislation in Canada's parliament. The parcel (it must have cost above a quid just in postage) contained the gift of a tee-shirt. This was insulting in several ways. The picture was of a cuddly puppy dressed in the Union Jack – quite sick-making. Given my wife's slender proportions, it was way too large. And the text below the nauseating visual read 'IFAW supporter' which was quite untruthful as such naff communication ensured that neither my wife nor I would ever consider supporting this cause.

2. Pointless pen packs and questionable questionnaires

A few years ago a copywriter called Karin Weatherup from my agency Burnett Associates conceived and wrote a truly brilliant

direct mail pack for our client Amnesty International. It was their banker around the world for years. It told the gruesome story of a young man who was tortured by having his eyes put out with an ordinary Biro pen. The mailing enclosed a small plastic pen and said 'what you hold in your hand can be an instrument of torture or it can change the world'.

Karin's brilliant copy goes like this:

'Go on', it says of the small plastic pen that was attached. 'Tear it off the page. Hold it in your hand. Feel the point. Think about it...Stretch your imagination. Because that's what torturers around the world do. They excel at it: using their imaginations to fashion instruments of torture out of the most everyday things.'

Great copy – use the pen we've given you as an instrument of change, to change the world.

'Feel the point', Karin wrote. The thing is that in attaching a free, plastic pen to this pack there was a rather obvious point...

It worked rather well, as you can imagine.

Then suddenly everyone was doing pen packs, even when there was no logical reason to include the free pen. Fundraisers turned the addition of a free pen into a cheap, offensive, off-putting gimmick.

It was a similar story with the advent of questionnaires, or survey packs, with which pen packs are often combined. At first, Greenpeace included a questionnaire because they genuinely wanted to know their supporters' views on a range of issues. It stimulated response. In time, this too became a bandwagon. Soon everyone was sending prospective donors questionnaires, mostly with no intention of evaluating or *even of looking* at the responses so thoughtfully and painstakingly completed. They still abound, these survey packs, though most donors saw through them long ago, and learned to treat them with the contempt they deserve.

3. Meeting face to face.

Initially at least, people tolerated face-to-face (street) fundraising and even found it amusing. But there's a limit to how many causes the average passer-by can support with a monthly gift. And if you are accosted by these tabard-clad fundraisers on a daily basis as you go to work and again as you come home, the initial attraction quickly palls, and turns to dislike, even contempt. Most people find this kind of face-to-face fundraising irritating and intrusive. People don't like to constantly have to say 'No', particularly to a worthy cause.

It was never likely that the public would come to relish being stopped in the street by fundraisers, and asked to sign a monthly direct debit. The modern day equivalent of 'Buddy, can you spare me a dime?' is the deathly banal 'Can you spare a couple of minutes for Alzheimer's?', or similar. The people who do this surely highly dispiriting, draining job have come to be seen not as inspirers but as 'chuggers'. It's an unflattering descriptor, not a term of endearment. It's shorthand for charity muggers.

So, more and more people every day are joining the ranks of those who routinely cross the street to avoid fundraisers. And as a result of the public's growing distaste for F2F, it won't be long before fundraisers' ability to use this highly successful recruitment method will be legally restricted. Regrettable but understandable public aversion to the way we practise this form of fundraising means this particular golden goose will almost certainly soon be for the chop.

Bad news for fundraisers, of course, but also I suggest likely to cause lasting damage to the public's perception of the causes fundraisers represent. I wonder how many promised bequests have been deleted from donors' wills, following one unwelcome encounter too many with a chugger? We'll never know. But logic suggests that quite a few would be likely.

4. The names we call people

Respect from the organisations they support is something most donors would automatically expect. It doesn't always follow. Fundraisers, I find, frequently refer to donors and supporters in terms that might not help their aspirations of building lasting, mutually beneficial relationships.

When we write our fundraising letters we should always imagine we are writing to our mother, or someone equally close and vulnerable for whom we'd rather die than offend. And when we gather in our conference halls, seminars and workshops we should always imagine a group of our donors standing at the back of each room, listening intently to proceedings. Nothing we say or do should confuse or offend them, or make them feel in any way uncomfortable. Just as we do with beneficiaries, we should always imagine a group of donors standing at our doorway, hugely interested in and potentially greatly affected by what we're doing on the inside. Such images should not just influence how we behave, what we say and what we do. They should also inspire us.

Similarly we should show respect with the labels we stick on donors, with the terminologies and titles we use to describe donors

or groups of donors. I've always railed against the term 'lapsed donors'. It sounds almost biblical, like fallen women. How dare they lapse, these people? Worse still are the terms some fundraisers ascribe to different segments of their databases. I've heard otherwise nice, polite fundraisers refer to groups of their donors and former donors as 'the residue', 'the leftovers', 'the dead pool' and 'the sediment'.

5. The future of fundraising is...gold foil!

Perhaps this isn't yet a problem for British fundraisers. But it may be the shape of things to come. I was recently at a seminar in the USA, where a range of direct mail packages and treatments was displayed from the podium, and the audience was invited to guess which treatment worked best, in terms of response achieved.

The problem was that all of the dozens of samples we were shown shared certain characteristics which if adopted in Britain as blindly as we've adopted most US fundraising techniques in the past, will surely lead to the death of fundraising as we know it. For all the mailings on show that day featured the same formats, design styles, creative treatments and ways of presenting their cause. All that was different from pack to pack was the type of tiny trivial incentive that was included. These incentives, we were informed, are the only really important ingredient when it comes to influencing response. The incentives on display included Easter seals, personalised name and address labels, Christmas seals, cards, gift tags, holiday name labels, prayer cards, seed paper, badges, colour die-cuts, Christmas paper... and of course, patriot seals (ie, featuring the Stars and Stripes). Oh, and changing the reply envelope's colour can help too. As can an outer envelope copy line such as 'Your beautiful holiday labels are enclosed'.

The cause, it would appear, makes very little difference. What matters in direct mail fundraising, we were told, is the choice, style, colour and prominence of the premium or incentive; the little freebie treat, the tiny donor's delight that so dominated each of this seemingly endless procession of packs that its takeover of both envelope and contents was complete. If the ideal fundraising pack were to evolve into just one big array of different incentives – and then outperformed the banker – well hey, that's just the logical conclusion of best direct mail practice.

'We're not here for the long term. We can't wait.' was just one of the many informative lines that issued from the podium. Hardly an appropriate sentiment for bequest fundraisers!

But for me the moment of truth at this truly eye-opening seminar came when we were asked what the outcome would be if patriot seals, which I and millions of like-minded knuckleheads would assume in these troubled times to be unbeatable in eliciting donor

commitment, were to be tested head to head with gold foil labels? What indeed? We waited, breathless... Well I'll be gosh-darned if the gold foil didn't win, hands down!

At this revelation a frisson of anticipation raced round the room. Simultaneously it dawned on each of us, 'What if you could test putting gold foil actually on the patriot seals?...'

Answers on a postcard please to *Contributions* magazine. There's no prize.

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