

Getting the Message Across

Practical strategies to tackle public concerns about donating to charity

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Introduction

The summer of 2013 witnessed a flurry of newspaper coverage regarding the salaries of a number of charity CEOs, led by the Telegraph, which drew attention to the 30 charities whose chief executive's salaries exceeded £100,000.¹ The furore renewed longstanding sector debates on the potential of such publicity to damage public engagement with charities and provoked familiar concerns regarding public misperceptions of the way in which contemporary charities do and should operate.² Were the media and public right to be angry about levels of executive pay, or were charities failing to make a strong case for why these were justified and necessary? What would that case look like if so? Do non-profit organisations genuinely have a problem with administrative costs and waste more generally, or is there an ongoing and problematic gap between public understandings of what the modern charity looks like, and the sophisticated reality?

nfpSynergy has been exploring public attitudes to these issues, from perceptions of charity salaries to concerns about administrative and fundraising costs for over a decade through our Charity Awareness Monitor (CAM).³ In 2006 we wrote a first edition of Getting the Message across, arising from this work researching public perceptions of charities on behalf of our clients in the third sector and the ImpACT Coalition's work on trying to change the way that charities are seen by their key stakeholders. However, eight years later it is clear that the gap between how 21st century charities work and how the public *think* they work, remains substantial.

In response to the resurgent public debate about charity expenditure, executive pay and a host of other broader trust issues, nfpSynergy held three focus groups earlier this year with charity donors of a range of professional backgrounds and ages.⁴ To underpin an updated report into understanding and tackling public misperceptions, we wanted to dig behind the data to find out what our donors really thought about CEO salaries, administrative costs and the value of regulation, as well as how they thought charities could better communicate on such issues to their donors.

The results were revealing and sometimes surprising; drawing our attention to the contrast between the immediate gut reaction which the public sometimes have to certain statistics about charities' operations and the more considered responses brought to the fore through discussion and rational argument. While the gut reaction tends to dominate findings in our quantitative tracking data, we found that the discursive environment created in focus groups brought out a much more nuanced understanding and empathy for the pressures both charities and donors are subject to.

¹ *The Telegraph* (2013), '30 charity chiefs paid more than £100,000,' (Accessed July 2014:<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10224104/30-charity-chiefs-paid-more-than-100000.html>)

² For e.g. see Third Sector blog (2013), 'Why isn't the sector defending chief executive pay?', Third Sector (2013) 'Analysis: Transparency in the Sector' (Accessed July 2014), Civil Society (2013) 'Shawcross slams charity chief exec pay' (Accessed July 14)

³ Please see our website for more details: <http://nfpsynergy.net/nfpsynergy-monitors/charity-awareness-monitor>

⁴ One group was held with participants in their mid 20s to mid 30s, another with individuals in their 40s and early 50s, and a third with participants in their late 50s to early 70s.

Bad publicity and scare stories will always arise – and no individual charity can take on the world on its own. For the modern charity, therefore, the critical response to a sometimes mistrustful giving environment is nurturing just this kind of nuanced understanding. When communicating with the public, it is critical that organisations understand the common misperceptions that arise and work to consistently present evidence of good practice that helps to cut through the uncertainty and creates clarity, affinity and trust. Building a better understanding of the fears that abound among existing and potential donors is therefore a critical step to creating a more unified strategy for tackling misperception and removing barriers to engagement.

Many people reading this will be fundraisers or charity communicators. However, we believe that the need to communicate more effectively runs far wider: that volunteers, the general public, trustees, staff and journalists all need to understand more about how modern charities work and to be persuaded of their effectiveness. So we use the term 'stakeholders' throughout to encapsulate this broader set of audiences.

Above all, this document focuses on practical ideas and strategies for getting the messages out of the ideas bank and firmly into a stakeholder's head; whether it is to equip volunteers and staff to spread the word clearly and effectively, or to speak directly to uncertain potential donors. It is not easy to change perceptions and our tracking data shows many of the common myths to be long-engrained. However, by remorselessly drizzling these messages across the range of charity communications, non-profits can make a real difference to both the effectiveness of their own work, and trust across the third sector more broadly.

Overall, our takeaway conclusions are as follows:

- **The public holds a variety of stereotypes in their heads about modern charities and how they work.** These stereotypes are usually left undisturbed because charities have often not realised how outdated these often are in light of modern professional practice in the sector, and have therefore not prioritised addressing the gaps in understanding.
- **This means that much of the public continue to associate charities with amateurism and are therefore shocked to learn of practices essential to running an effective modern organisation.** If we continue to think of charities as small, grassroots, predominantly voluntary-run organisations (as, indeed, many still are), hearing about high pay for executive staff of big charities, costly re-brands or fancy offices can look dangerously like waste at best and cynical mis-management at worst. These gaps in expectation and perception then lead to believing that staff are overpaid, too little reaches the cause, admin and fundraising costs are too high and that a donation is, in effect, wasted.
- **Individual charities cannot tackle the big picture for the sector but they can get the message across to their own stakeholders** especially staff, volunteers, the media and their supporters. In this way, they are also able to play a part in educating society about the third sector as a whole and working to improve public trust for all.

- **We suggest that there are six key ways to get messages about effectiveness across:** pledges; tangible successes; testimonials; surveys; wordbites; and confiding in stakeholders. Which methods appear most appropriate, and in which combinations, will depend on individual organisations, and we would encourage charities to take these ideas simply as a starting point for thinking about how they can better get their own message across on effectiveness and trust.
- **The key to success is consistent, ubiquitous and unrelenting drizzling of messages** through every communications channel at your disposal. Not reams of information or a deluge of data (though you should certainly have this at your fingertips); but a constant release of simple, intelligible messaging that gradually builds up the context for informed and confident support throughout a donor's lifetime.

Part 1

Examining the evidence: key public concerns about charities

What we already knew from our data...

Recent research from nfpSynergy's Charity Awareness Monitor regarding public perceptions of charities demonstrate a considerable mismatch between public belief and reality as well as some areas where public (mis)understanding of charities' operations has the potential to create considerable concern. At the extreme, such concerns might even be impacting on levels of public trust with potential consequences for donations. The key headlines⁵ are highly revealing...

- When asked about fair CEO salaries, for the largest charities with incomes of over £100 million, around 1 in 10 people believe that the charity's CEO should be paid £100,000 or more per year. For medium sized charities (income of £10 million) less than 5% do.
- The average salary felt to be fair for the CEO of a charity with an income of over £100 million was just under £53,000, whilst for small charities (salary of £1 million) the mean 'fair' salary was slightly less than £29,000.
- The highest social grade (AB) gave the most generous responses on fair CEO salaries at an average salary of £62,000 for a charity with a £100 million income, suggesting that personal affluence affects what we see as acceptable.
- Notably, a considerable proportion of the public (31%) believe that charity CEOs probably or definitely should not be paid at all. That almost a third feel this way points to a clear and substantial discomfort with the notion of charity pay in general.
- When we have compared this to perceived fair salaries for chief executives of banks and businesses, it is generally believed that charity CEOs should receive less. It would appear that as a whole we still feel that charity sector workers should be motivated primarily by sentiment and belief in the cause, and not by the wish to make a living.
- When it comes to charitable spending, the public estimate that 37% of charities' incomes goes on 'admin', 26% on 'fundraising' and 38% on 'the cause'. So in the majority of cases the public believe that there is a bigger problem with overspend on administration and fundraising than exists in reality.

⁵ Charity Awareness Monitor, nfpSynergy, various waves including Mar 12, Nov 13, Jan 14, Apr 14

- Overestimation of admin and fundraising may be partly caused by poor defining of what we might reasonably categorise under these headings; for instance, 65% of the public count a chief executive's salary as an admin cost, while 7% view it as a fundraising cost and just 6% see it as spending on 'the cause'.
- Too little money going to the cause is the largest barrier for the public when it comes to giving to charity; 60% select this as an off-putting factor, with too much money spent on staff salaries coming in second place at 50%.
- London based offices are viewed as a highly wasteful use of charity's resources; 44% believe they are 'very wasteful' whilst a further 25% state that they are 'somewhat wasteful'. Similarly, when it comes to rebranding, considerably more rate this activity as wasteful than worthwhile; 40% say it is a very wasteful use of funds, whilst 29% believe it to be quite wasteful.
- The fundraising methods which the public are most likely to state that they find very annoying are telephone and doorstep fundraising (50% and 48% respectively), with face-to-face street fundraising in third place at 36%. The methods perceived as both least annoying and most effective are television and newspaper advertising.
- In comparison to many other public institutions (including the Government, newspapers, the BBC and the police), public trust in charities tends to be relatively high. However, in the past year trust has fallen for the first time since 2011. 56% of people now trust charities 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal', compared to 66% in 2013.

The CAM research highlights a serious lack of clarity regarding public knowledge of necessary charity expenditure, in particular with regard to staff pay. Combined with this is a tendency to over-estimate charitable spending on admin and fundraising – suggesting a public perception of charity inefficiency and wastefulness – and to under-estimate elements defined as spending on 'the cause'. Further, irritation at how charities raise money (and lack of understanding of the effectiveness of different methods) as well as poor comprehension of the resources which are necessary to the successful operation of large professional charities may be creating an environment of uncertainty and mistrust when it comes to charities. It was the gap between perception and reality which we were keen to explore in more depth with our focus group participants in Spring 2014.

Qualitative evidence from the focus groups

Familiar charity bugbears

The focus group discussions were kicked off by asking donors to get everything that annoyed them about charities out in the open; described as their charity 'Room 101s'. There were very few surprises here with the gripes raised closely matching our previous research findings, with 'chuggers', guilt tripping and persistent fundraising raised across the age spectrum. However, it was a useful reminder of the strength of negative feeling that can be created in charity/donor interactions; *"they really pressed her and made her feel very uncomfortable and I think that was disgusting"* (Female, 50s/60s).

The key issues for discussion were also quick to come up spontaneously with statements such as its *"difficult to know whether you can trust them or not"* (Male, 40s/50s) and questions about *"what percentage of your pound goes to the actual cause"* (Female, 40s/50s). Concern about how charities spend their money ranged from wastage; *"I often get quite a lot of free magazines and all this stuff through the post that...would be better online"* (Male, 20s/30s), through to allegations of misused funds; *"you don't know whether they're lining their own pockets"* (Male, 40/50s).

CEO pay: tolerance and justification

However, when given a copy of the Telegraph headline on charity CEOs' pay – which drew attention to salaries exceeding £100,000 for the heads of 30 charities – participant reactions quickly diverged from the expectations we had formed as a result of our existing quantitative data. Participants were savvy about the media's attempts to find a controversial angle and suspected a level of hypocrisy; *"The thing that annoys me of course is the journalist who will probably be exposing this and saying isn't this terrible, they probably earn £200,000"* (Male 50s/60s). Participants were quick to make comparisons with salaries in other sectors and the majority supported the need to provide competitive remuneration. However, there clearly wasn't a limitless ceiling on charity salaries, and some raised concerns about charity staff being motivated solely by money. They also wanted to see impact – well paid CEOs needed to prove their worth; *"It's just being clear and knowing...if they earn that amount, what do they do to earn it"* (Male, 40s/50s).

It is worth noting here that some respondents were perhaps less immediately tolerant on the issue of high salaries – indeed one respondent in our oldest group took a sharp intake of breath on hearing the Telegraph's £100,000 figure, whilst in another group one participant stated *"I'd like to know which charities are doing it, because I'll make sure I won't give them any money"* (Male, 40s/50s). However, in listening to others' justifications around the high skill level needed for the job and the comparisons to other sectors such as education or banking, the group as a whole seemed to gain an understanding and acceptance of why such salary levels might exist – which seemed to override the initial distaste some felt towards the figure. Context was extremely valuable; the opportunity to contextualise high salaries through the focus group seemed to provide the reasoning and justification for overruling the instant reaction – which might in other circumstances have won the day.

However, when asked to discuss statements which charities could use to justify CEO salaries, such as *'our CEO hasn't had a pay rise in 4 years'* and *'if we paid our CEO less your donation would not be as well spent'*, many participants became irritated by the tone; *"would I be wanting to pay into an organisation where the boss is getting paid three times more than me?...And I'm supposed to feel sorry for him he hasn't had [a pay rise] for four years?"* (Male, 40s/50s). Although this shows the more extreme end of the views, participants disliked "defensive" statements. They wanted to hear about real value and impact for the charity, rather than about hard done by CEOs.

Dialogue example - Justification of CEO pay: A discussion in the oldest group demonstrates the reasoning process the group engaged in when discussing CEO pay – participants took on board each others’ arguments, bringing in their own experience, to justify salaries of £100,000.

Male: *I used to certainly not be in favour of these charity chiefs earning these huge sums, however...I changed my position on that because I just feel now that if you were to get somebody – I don’t mean this disparagingly but a very ordinary person to head up a charity and you have another charity with one of these type of people, which of those charities is likely to flourish and expand...*

Female: *I think it’s acceptable, going on comparison with what other people earn. My friend’s daughter, she works in marketing and advertising and in media, £75,000 a year. But she’s not a chief - a charity, the buck don’t stop with her...*

Male: *GPs earn about £100,000 roughly.*

Female: *I think if you’re managing say £5 million, £10 million, £500 million, if you’re managing money that’s been donated by folk like us, we want to think there is at least a fair chance of reaching the right people. I think if he’s a qualified whatever, he’s a qualified accountant or something, you’ve got a better chance than if it’s being managed by somebody who is not qualified, not professional, in dealing with that sort of product.*

Dialogue example: Irritation at CEO pay: The quotes below are from a discussion in the mid age group regarding statements defending high CEO salaries, particularly those referencing pay cuts and salary freezes for CEOs. The comments demonstrate the dangers of defensiveness over CEO pay and the importance of sensitivity to the financial circumstances of the average donor.

Male: *If she’s such a hero, then fine. What are we supposed to say? Oh dear? What a shame? I mean the majority of us don’t get paid that kind of money, so why should she be the exception?*

Male: *....would I be wanting to pay into an organisation where the boss is getting paid three times more than me? I’m donating for charity. And he’s given himself a pay rise. And I’m supposed to feel sorry for him he hasn’t had one for four years? I’ll go and donate somewhere else.*

Male: *It’s quite self-defeating, because if you think four years ago, what were they getting paid to be able to four years on not have any more, it must have been a hell of a lot.*

Understanding of admin costs in a professionalised sector - but stringency still expected

A surprisingly tolerant outlook for charities’ admin costs once again came to the fore in the groups; *"It doesn’t really worry me, the admin cost to be honest, I just think they are necessary, so it wouldn’t put me off"* (Female, 20s/30s) and there was recognition of the need to spend money to make money; *"If that money’s spent well and actually in the end produces more for who it’s supposed to go to, then so be it"* (Male, 40s/50s). However, interpretations of where necessary overheads meet wastage may differ for charity staff and

the public. These conflicting sentiments were reflected in the donors' understanding of the need for a certain level of professionalism alongside a suspicion of charities perceived as overly slick.

In a more direct reflection of our survey data, focus group participants raised concerns over the necessity of fancy, central London offices, with the mid age group advancing, half in jest, into discussions on the need for charity staff to have any travel costs at all, or even carpeted offices or toilet roll. The groups were therefore largely supportive of statements about keeping tight checks on admin spend and were keen for charities to be visibly saving money wherever possible; *"It would be nice...if charities could encourage their staff to work from home"* (Male, 20s/30s).

Regulation provides assurance – but is poorly understood

Levels of knowledge of the Charity Commission varied with the majority thinking it sounded familiar but knowing little of its role. Most were highly positive about the value of such a body, and thought its presence provided reassurance against misuse of funds; *"if there weren't the Charity Commission you'd think it's all a free for all and they'd all be ripping us off"* (Male, 50s/60s). Not only that, but it was also presumed that greater public knowledge would have positive implications for donations; *"I just think if it was a bit more at the forefront, if people knew more about regulation, then certainly I know that would give me more of an incentive."* (Female, 20s/30s)

However, whilst a small minority thought they would now look at the commission website, for example when signing up for a direct debit, for most there was little appeal in wading through accounts to uncover concerns over spending; *"it's not anything that I want to personally go delving into or it's anything that keeps me up at night"* (Female, 20s/30s). Most felt that there was an element of blind faith involved in the giving process, as one participant put in, *"you'll drive yourself mad wondering where your pound's gone, so you just give and that's it"* (Female, 40s/50s). In short, whilst there was strong support for publically available records and accountability, donors lacked the time or inclination to investigate charities themselves.

Bitesized, concise information as the way forward

So how *do* the public want charities to advertise their transparency and accountability, given this desire for reassurance but disinclination towards research? How do they want to hear about regulation? Throughout the groups, and in particular for the youngest audience, the desire for "snappy", bitesized information was clear. They wanted bullet points, graphs or *"just an email with a pie chart...really simple and visual saying where the money is going."* (Male, 20s/30s).

A number of participants raised the idea of grading systems, such as restaurant style star ratings, or even inspections; *"I can imagine something like Ofsted...saying you are doing well, you're not doing well"* (Male, 20s/30s). Whilst there was recognition that markers of success (e.g. for spending ratios) might vary for different types of work, and participants in the youngest group debated concerns about the risks of charities focusing on too heavily on scores, some kind of standards assessment was largely supported by the groups.

Age matters?

CAM data on most of these issues tends to show a slight age skew with greater tolerance amongst the youngest. For example, our data shows that younger respondents are more likely to think charity sector workers in a range of job roles should be paid. Focus group sample size makes it less easy to draw reliable conclusions on the role of age. However, some reflection of this pattern was visible – for example, the younger respondents were least critical of the statements which charities could use to justify spending. However, the middle age group appeared as the least tolerant of the three, although this may have been partly related to the group's dynamics, explained in more detail below.

Message testing with the general public

As a follow up to the focus groups we tested a number of messages in the Charity Awareness Monitor to assess their effectiveness in providing reassurance to the public. Respondents were asked to assess the extent to which a number of statements – if issued by a charity – would reassure them in making a donation or believing that a charity was doing a good job.

Statements which were especially successful in providing reassurance included those around the scrutiny, transparency and accountability of charities necessitated by Charity Commission regulation. Such statements included *'Every new charity has to be scrutinised by the Charity Commission before it is approved'* (33% found this very reassuring/convincing and 37% quite reassuring/convincing) and *'Every charity's accounts are on the Charity Commission Website for anybody to see'*. Other popular statements covered careful regulation of expenditure and stringency by charities, for example *'We review all costs every year to make sure they are as low as possible'*, *'We want our staff to be working for the charity, not for the money'* and *'Nobody in our charity travels first class on expenses'*.

Chiming closely with the focus group message testing, least successful were statements which defended CEO pay – with statements such as *'Headteachers and GPs are now paid £125,000 a year - so why not charity CEOs'* and *'If we paid our CEO less your donation would not be as well spent'* receiving particularly low levels of reassurance. As we saw in the focus groups, these results again draw attention to the need for charities to be particularly careful about how they word statements on this issue. Charities need to provide convincing justification against critique (as well as encouraging donors to make their own justifications – as so many of our participants did) whilst avoiding alienating the public by sounding defensive or, worse, out of touch with the reality of donors' finances.

Qualitative vs. quantitative methodology: understanding the discrepancies

Although many of the findings of the focus groups corresponded closely with the CAM data, there were some surprises, especially the participants' higher tolerance on CEO pay. Consideration of the sample and methodology are therefore important to understanding potential causes of variation and the ways in which messaging will need to be tweaked for different audiences and in different contexts.

A warmer, more knowledgeable sample: Qualitative research necessarily entails a smaller sample and facilitates a more considered, discursive environment, so we need to be

cautious when making inferences to the UK population. Our focus group participants were all charity donors, so were likely to be slightly warmer to charities at the outset than the general public as a whole. They also appeared to be more knowledgeable about a few of the issues at stake – for instance very few suspected that charity trustees were paid, compared to 32% of our nationally representative Charity Awareness Monitor sample.

The role of 'expert' or dominant participants: Focus group analysis also needs to be alive to the power of group dynamics. A particularly dominant participant or a participant with strong knowledge of the discussion subject can have a steering impact on the group as a whole. For example, some participants may defer to the apparent expertise of a particular participant or participants – potentially losing confidence in their own views or being swayed by the appointed 'expert' and a general tendency towards group-think.

Although group dynamics were well managed by our focus group moderators to ensure all respondents had a chance to speak, the influence of knowledgeable individuals on the wider groups was enlightening in itself. Through exposure to rational, thought out explanations from fellow participants – for instance around the need for charities to pay competitively to attract staff capable of effective budget management – respondents could be moved quite smoothly from uncertainty, or even suspicion, to an informed position. This shows that however embedded certain prejudices may appear in our quantitative data, there is always scope for convincing, evidence-based argument to reassure and instil confidence.

Instant reaction vs. engaged discussion: When filling out an online survey, respondents spend just a few seconds considering their response. Results are therefore likely to demonstrate the public's instantaneous reactions or gut feelings about an issue which they may not have considered before. Conversely, a focus group allows participants' time to process their reactions through group discussion and consider different points of view or explanations. They hear the opinions of others and are required to think through, explain and rationalise their responses. Participants' views may appear contradictory, they may change their minds over the course of a discussion – perhaps convinced by a persuasive argument – and they may moderate their views in order to reach group consensus. None of this negates the value of their participants' responses – indeed, in many ways the focus group format brings us closer to the processes of opinion-forming we all go through in our daily lives.

Both the instant reaction and the engaged discussion matter a great deal for charities. A gut reaction to a negative charity story may turn a donor off a particular charity or cause for life, whilst well-chosen opportunities for charities to offer alternative viewpoints, justify and explain behaviours which concern donors may help the public to be more critical when they hear poor publicity about charities.

For modern charities with larger operating budgets, bigger workforces and more expansive reach than ever before, the question is where and how we can facilitate nuanced discussion amongst donors and act to educate on the effective operation of charities in the 21st century. If charities act to ensure that the sector has a strong voice in the debate, the public can be brought towards a better-informed and more balanced perspective; and simultaneously, the need to construct stronger arguments to win and maintain public trust should help keep charities on the right track when it comes to controlling their costs appropriately and ensuring money continues to be spent effectively.

Part 2

The goal: communicating comfort and understanding

As both quantitative and qualitative research shows, a gap in perceptions persists that has the potential to be very damaging for both specific donor confidence and broader public trust in charities. Thinking through this challenge to trust and how charities can and should respond, we suggest that there are two types of necessary message to get across: **messages that motivate and inspire** and inform stakeholders, and **messages that tackle worries and concerns** head-on.

In the first type of communication, messages are proactively wooing recipients with ideas that they have never thought about, such as how a charity has an impact or knows it is effective and so on. In the second type of message, a charity is tackling head-on the worries and concerns that we know are particularly prevalent. Table 1 summarises the nature and type of these messages and the different jobs that they need to do.

Motivating messages	Comforting messages
Messages that increase motivation and inspiration by stakeholders	Messages that reduce worries and concerns
These kind of message increase: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Loyalty▪ Commitment▪ Passion▪ Understanding	These kind of message reduce: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Doubts▪ Concerns▪ Worries▪ Niggles
Stakeholders support you if you get these kind of messages right	Stakeholders leave you, doubt you or are less committed without these kind of messages
Examples: we help twice as many people out of homelessness compared to a year ago – for half the cost; we have x many volunteers working tirelessly to improve life for people living with dementia	Examples: this leaflet only cost 7p to make; we review all supplier costs on an annual basis to ensure best possible value for money

Summarising the stereotypes in stakeholders' heads

As the previous section implied, there are four overarching groups of stereotypes about what concerns people about charities: how money is raised; how money is spent; whether charities really have an impact; and a belief or assumption that charities are still amateurish in nature. These four are shown in the box below.

There can be few people who work in or with the charity sector who haven't experienced the worries, concerns or misunderstandings that many people have about charities when talking about what you do for a living. One of our own personal favourite anecdotes is a regional fundraising manager for a health charity whose mother (a GP) was horrified that a

person working in a charity should have a 'company' car; regardless of the fact that the fundraiser had to travel 35,000 miles a year in the course of their job. If even public sector professionals can't see why a fundraiser might need a company car then it is clear that the stereotypes and misunderstandings charities must work to counter are not limited to more right-wing news outlets or only the least-informed demographics. Indeed, as both the quantitative and qualitative research shows, misconceptions and worries are widespread, even amongst charity donors.

The box below articulates a range of the thoughts that may typically go through people's heads. This is based on nfpSynergy's research. Everybody will have their own experiences of these kinds of worries and how they are articulated for specific charities.

What do supporters, stakeholders and the public worry about?

How money is spent: waste, inefficiency or extravagance

- How much does the Chief Executive earn?
- Does my donation all go on administration?
- Isn't all that aid being stolen?
- I hear hundreds of people work at their fancy London headquarters

How money is raised and whether fundraising works or is cost-effective

- How much does this fundraising cost?
- I never respond to telephone calls/junk mail from charities (so it must be a waste)
- I bet this appeal cost a bomb
- I can't bear those chuggers on the street and I hear they're paid commission

How charities work and the professionalisation of charities

- Why are there so many charities and so much duplication?
- Why does anybody have to be paid for such worthwhile work?
- Are charities regulated at all?
- You shouldn't have expenses if you're working for a charity

The impact of charities (and their donation of time or money)

- Is my donation really making a difference?
- Is it worth me giving up my time for this organisation?
- How does this charity really help?

The challenge for charities

The fundamental problem here is that charity sector has a cross to bear that other sectors do not. Because the sector asks people to make voluntary donations or give time, people have a much greater concern (and sense of ownership) about how every penny of income is spent. This sense of ownership over how 'my money' is spent is compounded by the difficulty in knowing whether a charity is actually doing a good job; the element of consumer confidence and knowledge about value for money is intrinsically problematic.

If a customer spends £100 on an airline ticket or a supermarket shopping trip, they can look at their experience or their trolley of food and decide whether they got value for money. If a

supporter gives £100 or five hours each week to a charity all they have to go on is their experience. So while there is not necessarily a relationship between the giving experiences of an individual and the service delivering capability of a charity, supporters can only go on their experience and what information they do have. So if Tesco has store managers paid £80,000 we do not care, provided our shopping experience and the value and quality of our goods in our supermarket trolley is high. If a charity pays a CEO £80,000 it becomes part of how the supporter sees their money being spent.

Counteracting public concerns

So this briefing is about helping to make sure that stakeholders' 'giving' experience is not the only way in which they judge the charities with which they are involved. Personal experience needs to be supplemented by evidence, ideas and information about the impact that a charity has on the world. As the focus groups demonstrated clearly, simple explanation and reasoned arguments from fellow participants could bring even sceptical individuals to a better understanding of why charities need to operate in the way they do.

To select an example from private sector branding, for most of the eighties and nineties, Skoda cars were universally derided. When they were bought out by Volkswagen, the quality improved dramatically while the low price tag remained. Amongst many other strategies for changing people's attitudes to Skoda (including some excellent TV advertising), the marketing team came up with the notion of 'pub facts': simple clear facts that would prove a point down the pub when somebody was insulting Skoda to a Skoda owner: For example *'Skoda was 'What Car of the Year' three years in a row'*.

Our focus group research showed that – with the right information – there is considerable potential for the public to gain better understanding and a more tolerant outlook towards charities and even begin to make their own arguments to explain charities' operations and champion their successes. This is the well informed, rational perspective that charities need to ensure is in the driving seat for the public – enabling them to give to charity with confidence. The following pages therefore provide some ideas for how a charity can develop a communications strategy that incrementally gets across attitude-changing messages on the effectiveness and impact of charities.

Part 3

Six key themes that every charity can communicate

Here are the six themes charities need to get across much better in order to address some of the concerns that stakeholders have and to strengthen knowledge:

1. Charities are effective and do a great job
2. To raise (more) money, charities have to spend money
3. Charities use your donations carefully and wisely
4. Charities are highly regulated and adhere to a range of strict standards
5. Charities work together wherever possible for common goals
6. Charities need public donations because they really do make a difference

Theme 1: Charities are effective and do a great job

Barrier or myth

The public do not always believe or know that charities do a crucial job in vast swathes of society; neither do they believe they are necessarily effective in their work.

The message in depth

Charities play a number of key roles in society. They provide vital services and carry out cutting-edge research. They work with the groups that government can't or won't help. Many challenge the laws and government policies that hurt the people they work with. They come up with new ideas and innovations to work more effectively. And this is happening not just in one or two charities, but in thousands and thousands of charities up and down the country. Moreover, because charities are heavily funded by voluntary donations and need to compete to win every grant and every new source of money, they need to be particularly effective and efficient.

The message in a nutshell

Charities help thousands of people every day and because they have to earn every penny they use it more effectively and more innovatively.

An individual charity should be able to:

- Demonstrate the scale of their impact for the charity as a whole (i.e. we help xxx people, we run xxx projects) and for individual activities
- Create and utilise at least two compelling wordbites which show the difference they make through their work, e.g. we find jobs for disabled people at half the cost of the Government
- Use examples of individual people as case studies and examples of effectiveness in action
- Repeatedly use the key wordbites below that show the effectiveness - for example on letterheads, in conversation, in advertising

Model wordbites which explain the impact of a whole charity

- We are the largest provider of social care after the Government.
- We helped xxx thousand people this year/ we help xxx people per week/per day
- Without your help/xxx more people would have died from cancer/xxx more children would still be suffering/be homeless
- xxx people lived/are alive today because of research funded by you
- If we didn't do this, no else would

Theme 2: To raise (more) money, charities have to spend money

Barrier or myth

The public is ambivalent, at best, about the wisdom of spending money on fundraising in order to raise additional funds in the long run. Since spending money to raise money is at the heart of most fundraising strategies, this lack of public buy-in is problematic - to put it mildly.

The message in depth

Fundraising for charities is not an easy task. It requires professionalism, imagination, rigour and expertise. As more charities raise money, fundraising gets harder and more competitive. Charities seek to increase their fundraising capacity: more staff, more supporters, more events and/or more direct appeals. All of this costs money – but charities know that the rewards are high – it just takes time. If supporters want their favourite charities to grow, the best way to do this is to endorse their investment in fundraising.

The message in a nutshell

More donations let us do more work – and by spending some of today's donations for tomorrow's income we can raise more money and help more people.

Complementary/additional messages

We fundraise responsibly and are members of the Fundraising Standards Board and the Institute of Fundraising.

As a minimum an individual charity should be able to:

- Give supporters 'pub facts' which demonstrate their overall or specific fundraising effectiveness
- Guide supporters to support them in the most cost-effective way
- Continually watch their costs/income ratio to identify and address poorly performing fundraising functions
- Continuously explain how investment in fundraising is both necessary and universal (all large charities do it)
- Never appear to defend high expense or wastage or condemn those who keep their costs down

Wordbites that explain why fundraising is cost-effective and important

- For every £1 spent on fundraising we spend another £xxx on saving lives etc
- Each leaflet costs just xxxp and could help save a life etc

- Fundraising and management costs ensure we can do more and do it better for those we help
- We use professional staff and committed volunteers to make a difference

Wordbites that explain how supporters' wishes are put centre stage

- We only phone supporters who have given us permission to ring them
- We only swap your name and address with your permission
- We allow supporters to influence how their money is invested
- We respect the right of supporters to question how we spend their money

Wordbites that explain how fundraising works and is effective

- Message for F2F collector bibs – 'I am paid, as this work saved the lives of xxx people last year etc'
- We include a pen as it encourages/ makes it easier for people to support our work and (if overprinted) means that you can promote us by using it.
- For every £1 donated, xxxp goes directly to saving lives/ funding life-saving research/ combating poverty etc
- If you are not happy with our work, we will give you your donation back

Theme 3: Charities use donations carefully and wisely Barrier or myth

The public want constant and tangible evidence that an organisation is keeping its costs down and not wasting money. But supporting charities is not like shopping at Tesco – there is no trolley of goods that a supporter can evaluate to decide if they got good value. So supporters and the public go on what they can see: evidence of waste and inefficiency (or just the perception of waste). As our qualitative research demonstrated – for example in conversations about mailings – if donors aren't informed of the value of charity's activities, they understandably assume them to be wasteful.

The message in depth

Charities battle in a thousand ways to keep their costs down. This does not mean they do not spend money – but they use money wisely. This may be by tendering for major contracts, by using the internet for purchasing, or reducing the size of mailings. Volunteers make donations go further because they help keep costs down by giving their time for free (although not all jobs can be done by volunteers).

The message in a nutshell

Charities never stop trying to keep their costs down and where they do spend money, it's because they know it is justified.

Complementary/additional messages

For a range of tasks, volunteers allow charities to do more for less.

As a minimum individual charities should be able to:

- Demonstrate numerous tangible examples (pub facts) of how they keep costs down – so saying 'trust us' to somebody who feels they get too many mailings (for example) is not necessarily effective in changing their perception.

- Communicate to supporters where expenditure has yielded results.
- Defend (without sounding defensive!) instances of high expenditure or perceived high expenditure (e.g. CEO's salary).

Wordbites that demonstrate carefulness with funds

- We review all costs every year to make sure they are as low as possible
- All of our post is sent out second class.
- We provide information free of charge, but if you can afford to make a contribution we can reach more people.
- 'Please re-use or recycle me' message on all bags.
- We use email to save money and time.
- We use the telephone to contact supporters because it saves money (i.e. it has a better ROI).
- Nobody travels first class at our expense.
- Please tick the box if you would like to help us save money by not acknowledging your donation.
- Please accept our thanks now, and tick the box to say you do not need a receipt and help save money
- Every leaflet is an opportunity to find a new supporter to our cause
- If you do not wish to support us, please pass this mailing/insert on to a friend.

Wordbites that help show the importance of volunteers

- The trustees who run our organisation are unpaid (volunteers).
- Telephone response lines – if not available use recorded messages to explain it is staffed by volunteers.
- Xxx% of work is done by volunteers to whom we only pay expenses
- Sign explaining that staff are volunteers.
- Our volunteers work for almost nothing.
- Xxx% of our income is raised by volunteers who give their time for free.
- Face to face/Shop environment - "I am a volunteer. I don't get paid, but ask me what I do get".
- Many of the people you meet here are volunteers.

Theme 4: Charities are highly regulated and adhere to a range of strict standards

Barrier or myth

Charities are unregulated and it would be very easy for somebody to defraud them or steal their money, or for them to use my money in ways that nobody knows about. Our focus group participants highlighted these widespread concerns about the potential for misuse of funds by charities – further, few understood the role of regulatory bodies.

The message in depth

Charities are regulated. They are regulated by the Charity Commission in England and Wales and/or OSCR in Scotland and, in certain cases, Companies' House. Certain fundraising activities are regulated by specific regulatory bodies including the Financial Services

Authority, Ofcom, National Audit Office, and the Gambling Commission. Charities are regulated by HM Revenue and Customs in relation to tax-effective giving and the taxes we pay and reclaim. Finally, self-regulation was introduced in 2007, a commitment by charities to adhere to the sector's Code of Fundraising Practice – self-regulation is supported by a formal audit programme run by the Fundraising Standards Board.

The message in a nutshell

Charities are regulated – you do not need to worry.

Complementary/additional messages

Charities regulate themselves through the Fundraising Standards Board (and the Institute of Fundraising's codes of fundraising practice).

As a minimum individual charities should be able to:

- Tell stakeholders they are regulated by the Charity Commission.
- Sign up to self-regulation through the Fundraising Standards Board.
- Constantly reinforce the nature of charity regulation by drizzling it across a range of a charity's communications.

Wordbites that demonstrate charities are regulated

- Charities are regulated by the Charity Commission.
- We are a registered charity, our number is *****.
- Every new charity has to be scrutinised by the Charity Commission before it is approved.
- We operate the highest standards of financial control and accountability.
- We produce accounts every year and our accounts are published on the Charity Commission Website for anybody to see.
- We adhere to over 20 codes of practice set out by the Institute of Fundraising.
- We abide by the Fundraising Standards Board's Fundraising Promise because supporters have rights and we respect them.
- If you would like a copy of the Fundraising Promise, you can write to xyz, telephone xyz, or go online to www.xyz.org.uk
- You can request a copy of our Annual Report and Accounts free of charge from xyz.
- We are regulated by the Charity Commission to make sure we meet the legal requirements of charities. We are formally recognised as a charity by HM Revenue and Customs for tax purposes including gift aid. We are regulated by Ofcom and the Advertising Standards Authority for our advertising. We are regulated by the National Audit Office for our expenditure of government funds.

Theme 5: Charities work together

Barrier or myth

There are too many charities and they don't work together.

The message in depth

Charities work together in a whole myriad of ways. Charities often work together in ways that the public do not see – such as delivering services or cutting costs. But charities also do

not work together when they think they can try something new or different or innovative.

The message in a nutshell

Charities work together when it makes sense – and don't when it doesn't!

Complementary/additional messages

Nobody wants all the banks or supermarkets to merge into one – so why is everybody so keen for charities to merge.

As a minimum individual charities should be able to:

- Let stakeholders know about the partners they have through mailings, email footers and letterheads.

Wordbites to demonstrate that charities do work together

- We work with others to make sure we maximise the benefit we provide.
- Every charity's work is important and we do work together.
- We work with local social services to xxx.
- We work with local partners in the countries we work in.
- We share office space with other charities to save administration costs.
- We work with other charities to determine who is best placed to undertake specific work.
- If we cannot help, we will find another charity that can.
- We share our fundraising knowledge and expertise to make the most of our fundraising.
- We, along with other overseas charities, have formed the Disasters Emergency Committee.
- We belong to a charity consortium to share the cost of promoting legacies.
- This project is jointly funded by X and Y.
- X and Y are working together to ensure that Z gets the best deal.

Theme 6: Charities need the public's donations because they really do make a difference

Barrier or myth

Individual donations don't make a difference because charities are so large and donations are wasted.

The message in depth

Many charities survive only because of the individual donations they receive. Sometimes these donations are all they have, and in other cases donations make the difference between a good service funded by government and a great one. And charities are grateful for donations. They try to say thank you directly – but sometimes it is more effective to get on with putting the donation to good use.

The message in a nutshell

Thank you, thank you, thank you – your donations do make a difference: to us, to our work and to the people we exist to help.

Complementary/additional messages that need to be communicated

- Individual donations make a difference.
- Charities need your support and people's lives will be changed by it.
- Donations & voluntary income are important to charities.

As a minimum individual charities should be able to:

- Develop simple wordbites which help supporters understand how their donations make a difference and how effectively they are used.
- Make clear to stakeholders from where the organisation procures its income.
- In this context 'more is more' in order to build up a generalised awareness of the importance of donations to charities

Wordbites that explain the importance of donations overall

- No gift is too small; every penny helps us do our work.
- Without you and thousands like you, X would be without our support.
- However you give, we thank you. We need your kind gifts, your time and your input to ensure our work continues. Whichever way you choose to support, we hope you'll continue to do so.
- However you give - thank you.
- Our work is only possible with public donations.
- "ABC is a charity that relies on public donations to carry out its work" on every envelope/communication piece.
- Our work is only possible with public donations.
- Without your support our work for the animals/children etc simply would not happen.
- X% of our work is funded by public donations.

Wordbites that make specific links between donations and how they are used

- Shop window - Thank you, Gloucester. Last month you helped us dig ten new wells in Ethiopia.
- The person carrying this bag has helped fund heart research.
- This (service) has been made possible by voluntary donations.
- Your £10 does X.
- Today you have helped xxx.
- Your legacy saves xxx.
- Every month your direct debit xxx.
- This month, next month you will ...xxx.
- Every donated item helps xxx.
- Thanks to you we have helped get x people back to work/x neglected animals rehomed/xxx people fed.

Part 4

Six ways to get your message across

Approach 1: The pledge

We all like pledges. They let us know where we stand with both individuals and organisations. They convey confidence to the recipient irrespective of whether the pledge is ever likely to be tested. In the commercial world pledges are commonplace. The long-lasting and best recognised in the UK is probably John Lewis' 'never knowingly undersold'. FedEx in the United States grew large on promising to deliver 'absolutely, positively overnight'. Many companies promise the slightly more vague 'satisfaction guaranteed or your money back'.

A variant of the pledge approach is a commitment to repair and service items for a long time period. Japanese cars and some other household items come with two or three year guarantees.

The purpose of the pledge approach to the seller is not to commit themselves to huge and ongoing levels of repairs, but to demonstrate to the purchaser their confidence in the product. This demonstration of confidence is designed to increase levels of sales.

The three rules of pledges are:

- Conveys confidence in the product to the consumer
- Is low-cost to deliver and high benefit to receive
- And is relevant and credible

This last point is important. Guarantees can be too long or unbelievable. There are soap dishes with a 25 year guarantee. How likely is it that anybody would go back 22 years after buying a soap dish to complain?

So how does this notion transmit to the not for profit sector? Quite well is the simple answer – though in practice it is rarely used by charities. It is probably seen as a little vulgar, which is a shame since it has so much potential.

How might it look?

- *Your donation back if you do not think it was effectively used*
- *We promise we will only send you mailings you want to receive*
- *Every letter of complaint is read by a director and we promise to respond within 14 days.*
- *We promise people who use our services that they will notice a difference within 6 months.*

In practice there are lots of ways that charities can make pledges but they rarely do. Two that have done are Friends of the Earth and Habitat for Humanity. Both pledged to return donations if supporters did not feel they had been well spent. In the case of Friends of the Earth the pledge was put on the outer envelope of appeal letters and resulted in increased donation numbers while very few people ever asked for their money back.

Approach 2: Tangible successes and numbers

How does a stakeholder know that a charity does a good job? There are dozens of ways to try and answer this question but a fairly straightforward way to is to be explicit about how many, how much, or what has changed about what a charity does. Put simply:

- How many people did you help?
- How much support did you give to beneficiaries?
- How much money have you saved in the last year?
- What big things have you achieved in the last year?

Charities tend to have a British reticence about shouting their achievements from the rooftops. This often hides an inability to shout about their achievements because they have not measured them or collated them.

So approach 2 to communicating impact requires a bit of un-British bravery and a calculator.

How might it look?

- *We have provided over 500,000 people in Bangladesh with clean water*
- *Each year we take over 1 million calls from people needing our help*
- *Last year we cut our IT costs by £800,000 by working closely with another charity*
- *Last year we reduced our admin costs by 12% by using the latest mobile technology*
- *We successfully lobbied the Government to introduce a free screening test for every newborn child*

The evaluation storm troopers will frown on the simplicity of this kind of measurement system. Outputs and outcomes are being muddled they will argue. How do we know that people who got clean water had their lives changed, or that taking a telephone call is not the same as changing a life? They are probably right. But as the old adage goes 'the pursuit of perfection is the enemy of the pursuit of doing things better'. Every charity has to start somewhere with measuring and communicating impact. For too long, charities have not done things because they were too hard or a perfect solution was elusive. Every charity needs to start somewhere.

Approach 3: Testimonial and endorsements

The commercial advertising industry has known for some time that getting real people to provide their endorsements to a product acts as a reassurance to prospective and existing customers. The message is simple – I used this product and liked it, so could you. We all relate to real people and can identify with their situation in many cases. So when we see pictures of somebody who has lost 4 stone on a new diet, or a person who found love online, or a car owner who saved on their car insurance we are meant to feel "that could be me."

In the charity world the concept is the same but the application is slightly different. Few stakeholders are likely to think 'that could be me' with any relish when faced with images of

a charity beneficiary. Indeed quite the opposite. But the notion of presenting real people has the same power. People speak to people. That's why child sponsors get letters from their sponsored child.

A twist on the endorsement approach is the celebrity endorsement approach. The power of this approach is that if a trusted, respected, public figure provides a testimonial about the power or impact of a charity's work it adds a punch to the message that ordinary endorsements may not be able to.

How might it look?

- *When clean water came to my village, I had the time to teach my children to read – and none of us get sick so often. Thank you XXXX*
- *When I called to ask about how to reduce my council tax, the person on the phone was so helpful and the booklet was brilliant. Thank you XXXX*
- *XXXX are one of the most cost-conscious charities I have ever worked with. The Gates Foundation*
- *My child was diagnosed with a profound hearing loss at 3 weeks old. This meant that we never missed a step in helping her to get the best support. Thank you*

(All these quotes are fictitious – sadly)

There are few charities that cannot provide testimonials of some sort. The key ingredients are making sure that stakeholders see them as genuine and that they come from people whose views mean something. It is great for a Chief Executive to say 'this charity is fantastic' but what else are they going to say? The same applies to a beneficiary – of course they are going to say good things about the service, so the emphasis needs to be on the difference to the quality of life it has engendered.

Approach 4a: Quartiles and percentiles

The commercial sector uses comparative results as a central weapon to demonstrate impact and effectiveness. 'Our prices are 10% lower measured against a basket of other supermarkets', 'Our ISA is in the top 3 for average annual growth' and so on. Much of this comparative approach would not be acceptable in charities.

So the question is whether there are elements of it that can be used. The approach that is most likely to be acceptable is a comparison with the sector as a whole (see the 'How might it look?' box below).

How might it look?

- *We're in the top 25% of charities with happy staff*
- *We aim to keep our admin costs below 10% but above 5% to make sure our charity is lean but efficient*

So do not hold your breath about this approach, though one day a charity or two will work out a way to use comparative data effectively, without offence, and they will steal a march on their competitors.

Approach 4b: Survey results

If using comparative data is difficult, then using survey results should be straightforward – providing the information is available. The advantage of survey data is that it can be used to reassure stakeholders who otherwise might be uncomfortable. For example, suppose a supporter is unhappy about how many mailings they receive, then the knowledge that 90% of donors are happy is likely to leave them feeling that they are exceptional in their discomfort, rather than the norm.

Similarly how can one organisation prove that it does a good job with its clients or beneficiaries? It may be that the cost per beneficiary is high or hard to establish, so providing information that 90% (or whatever the figure is) of clients are satisfied or very satisfied will help provide donors with comfort and reassurance.

How might it look?

- *In our surveys of donors 90% said they were happy with the level of mailings they received*
- *In our survey of staff 90% said they felt the organisation was effective or very effective at keeping costs down*
- *In our survey of volunteers 90% said they felt the organisation was good or very good at making the most of their skills*
- *In our survey of clients 90% said they felt our counselling services has made a big or a huge difference to their lives*

Most professional charities will already be carrying out regular surveys of key stakeholders as part of their own internal impact and effectiveness suggestions.⁶

Approach 5: Confide in your stakeholders

None of this is easy. Nobody said it would be. So tell your stakeholders that. Society has a terrible tendency to force perfection and infallibility on those in public life. Politicians can never admit that something is difficult to achieve or to implement. Companies can never acknowledge it is hard work coming up with even better services and lower prices.

Charities do not have to get caught in this trap. They can admit that something is difficult – indeed they can turn their weaknesses into a source of intimacy and strength in relationships with stakeholders. The box below gives an example of how this might work.

⁶ And if they are not, nfpSynergy is happy to help!

How might it look?

Our biggest difficulty is working out how to make sure our work is effective. We don't pretend this is easy. It's not. So we work in dozens of different ways to improve our effectiveness – by asking our clients, by surveying our staff and volunteers and by asking you our donors what you think. So if you have ideas about how we could do this better please let us know. Last year we received 250 letters of complaint and another 201 suggestions from staff and clients about how we could do a better job. Our CEO reads every one of them, we reply to every one and we acted on approximately half.

This confiding approach can work in a number of ways: about complaints, about proving effectiveness, about keeping costs low and even with staff and their concerns. This is because inherent in this approach is not just an acknowledgement that you do not have all the answers, but also a commitment to act on the ideas and responses generated by stakeholders.

Approach 6: Turn your core advantages or your impact into your brand - wordbites and soundbites

The next stage on from creating a range of statements which communicate the breadth of work that a charity does is turn 'pub facts' (to use the Skoda terms) into 'brand messages'. The difference between this approach and the previous ones is not necessarily the way that messages are communicated but the frequency and power with which they are used.

From all the plethora of words and messages that a charity puts out these may be boiled down into two or three key statements which are the most important messages that a charity is trying to get across.

This is not the place to get into detailed discussion about branding.⁷ In essence we are arguing that it makes strategic sense to turn the most powerful of a charity's statements into a longer-term statement of their competitive advantage. From the commercial sector perhaps the best-known of these is John Lewis' 'never knowingly undersold' which promises value to the customer and displays their confidence in keeping their prices low.

For charities, these statements might be about:

- Where the money comes from (e.g. individuals).
- Where the money does not come from (e.g. government or companies).
- How the work is done (e.g. using local staff).
- How the work is not done (e.g. no destruction of healthy animals)
- The difference from previous years (e.g. more people helped for less cost).

⁷ CharityComms (2012) *Branding Inside Out: A Best Practice Guide*, nfpSynergy (2002) *Polishing the Diamond* and (2005) *Branding: The Jeweller's Story*

How might it look?

- *We never put down a healthy animal*
- *Every 6 seconds we bring somebody fresh, clean drinking water*
- *It costs us £8 to answer a call - £1 less than last year*
- *Its costs us 8p for somebody to use our website – the most cost-effective way to get information to those who need it*
- *Our campaign to get free screening tests cost £60,000 – that's just 11p for every family tested each year. We make your donation work harder. 5000 volunteers, our trustees, our patrons and our president think our charity is so good they work for free*

Perhaps the real issue for this last approach is that it is all about taking which of the previous approaches has delivered the most powerfully and close to the strategic heart of the organisation and elevating its status to be part of the brand.

Getting the message across: creating a drizzle of messages across all communications

So you have agreed what messages you want to get across, and which approaches work best for you. Many charities understandably have what we call an 'annual report tendency', putting a huge amount of effort into massive, information-heavy output that is rarely seen or read (to paraphrase Churchill - never has so much energy been invested by so many to be read by so few).

The opposite strategy is needed, as our focus group participants strongly endorsed: a small amount of message but a continuous exposure. We call this the 'drizzle' strategy. Here are just some of the ways that these messages about comfort and inspiration can be got across:

- On the back of every letterhead
- On the bottom of every email
- On both sides of every donation form
- With every payslip
- On every business card
- On every page of the website and especially the home page
- On your Facebook and Twitter accounts, and in regular but snappy social media posts
- On the outer and return envelope of every mailing
- Inserted into every box of Christmas cards
- By training every staff member and volunteer to use the messages in conversation, in response to the most common worries they hear
- On every piece of corporate stationery including invoices and cheques
- Slipped into every radio & TV interview
- Woven into every press release

And many other opportunities relevant to your own communications cycle and regular messaging. The real secret is volume and frequency, not depth; messages that can be absorbed in 10 seconds, not 10 minutes.

Getting the Message Across: Top Takeaways

- 1. Public misconceptions abound when it comes to charities.** The worries we hear about in our research are widespread – whether it be that charity staff are overpaid, that admin and fundraising spend is wasteful and inefficient or that too little reaches the cause. Fuelled by negative media stories, myths and poor understanding around charities’ operations risks creating mistrust in the sector.
- 2. With the right facts and arguments, public acceptance and support grows.** The good news is that mistrust in charities is not permanently fixed. Qualitative research shows the powerful role that well-thought through explanations can have in changing the debate – with a few key arguments at their disposal, even potential sceptics can become powerful advocates for charities.
- 3. Simple, positive and clear messages to break down barriers and myths...** There are a number of different messages for charities to communicate; Charities need to have a voice in the debate - using their communications strategies to provide a positive story and build public comprehension.
- 4. ...Demonstrate charities’ vital role in society.** One of the most positive ways of reducing the risk of public mistrust in charities’ operations is reminding the public just how vital the work charities do is to society. Demonstrating the impact you have – and the vital work which wouldn’t happen without your charity – is the foundation for building public understanding and trust over the way that impact is achieved.
- 5. ...Explain the necessity of charities’ structures and operations.** Charities must prove that investment in fundraising and the administrative costs of running professionalised charities is not wasted expenditure but directly enables charities to maximise impact for the cause. A key way to build trust in your processes is to demonstrate the efficiencies that you *do* make; showing the public that you really do value their donation and make sure it goes as far as possible.
- 6. ...Provide reassurance against fears of inefficiency or mismanagement.** Our research shows that reminding the public of the fact that charities are regulated and must adhere to strict standards is an easy win for charities in counteracting fears about misuse of funds.
- 7. Whatever your approach, emphasise transparency and accountability.** The report reviews a number of approaches charities can use to communicate these messages to their supporters – from pledges, to testimonials to survey results. At the core of each is a demonstration to the public that charities are accountable and transparent; impact and successes are communicated in tangible and clear terms, efficiencies are proven and accountability to the public is emphasised.
- 8. A drizzle, not a deluge, to get the message across.** To cause a shift in opinion, these messages need to be embedded in our communications strategies – it’s not about a one off deluge, but an on-going drizzle of information running through everything we do. Short, snappy communications – think pub facts and memorable wordbites – provide easily digestible, memorable messages to gradually build public support and a sector which is more resilient to negative stories and misinformation.

About nfpSynergy

nfpSynergy is a research consultancy that aims to provide the ideas, the insights and the information to help non-profits thrive.

We have over a decade of experience working exclusively with charities, helping them develop evidence-based strategies and get the best for their beneficiaries. The organisations we work with represent all sizes and areas of work and include one in three of the top 100 fundraising charities in the UK.

We run cost effective, syndicated tracking surveys of stakeholder attitudes towards charities and non-profit organisations. The audiences we reach include the general public, young people, journalists, politicians and health professionals. We also work with charities on bespoke projects, providing quantitative, qualitative and desk research services.

In addition, we work to benefit the wider sector by creating and distributing regular free reports, presentations and research on the issues that charities face.



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