



## How We Don't Communicate

*A skeptical Brit delivers a wake-up call for fundraisers.*

BY GEORGE SMITH

**I'd better explain myself.** Though a large part of the world seems to have decided that I'm a fundraising "guru," I'm really just a humble hack. I write things is all. A lot of fundraising copy, for sure, but also lots of other stuff—direct marketing, journalism, ad copy, the very occasional broadcast piece. A few thousand words seem to slip out of this word processor each day. I mention this not to paint myself as a Renaissance man but to let you know that words are my passion as much as my trade.

So, I believe in words—what they can achieve by way of explanation, persuasion, and exhortation—the three qualities involved in written fundraising. And that's why it grieves me to see fundraising copy and creativity turning into another tribal language.

**The very language of fundraising has become impenetrable to the very people who make it possible—the donors.** It seeps into communication: I have seen a mailing that asked for "more resources" and I have seen plenty that thought nothing of addressing the reader as "Dear Major Donor."

And, are we happy that 95 percent of people we talk to never respond? Me, I'm outraged by such rudeness. For it has led to fundraising communication *that only exists as fundraising communication*. Who else but charities write you four-page letters with second para indents and

a PS and with a rhetorical question on the outer envelope? Who else calls you a supporter when you've given just the one donation? Who else talks of soliciting gifts when they mean asking for money?

We have become inbred in our communications. We have developed another

tunism. In the relative absence of experience, wide-eyed optimism tends to provide the fuel. We are not as surrounded by shibboleths.

Thus, the extraordinary example of BandAid in the mid-1980s. Bob Geldof put together a scratch band and made a

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tribal patois. We have ceased to communicate. And, because we are trying to communicate something a little more important than a magazine subscription or a supermarket promotion, I think that this is a minor social tragedy.

#### Some History

European fundraisers start with chronological privilege because they began to ply their trade a lot later than American fundraisers. That means that just about everyone still involved is actually a pioneer—fundraising is that young a science here. It is, therefore, a more pluralist business—doubtless lacking the gravitas and the formal disciplines of the American tradition, but maybe compensating with sheer full-blooded oppor-

record to help the victims of the then-famine in Ethiopia. The record is still the best-ever selling single in the UK and Geldof went on to mount a massive concert at Wembley Stadium, attended by 90,000 people and broadcast live throughout Europe for just about a whole Saturday. No one told him that he was unlikely to persuade a prime network channel to give up this sort of time. It is the best illustration of that best of fundraising mottos . . . *you don't get what you don't ask for*.

It was in the wake of this heightened awareness of Third World deprivation that Comic Relief took over. The British comic fraternity and sorority took over a

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channel for a telethon which now raises about 20 million pounds each time out. But this is no ordinary telethon—it is backed for a week beforehand by community fundraising events, all of them in the Comic Relief tradition. That is to say, everyone does silly things. They bathe in baked beans; they pull beds down Main Street; and, even in my rural village shop, they dress up as cowboys. All to raise funds.

If you come to the UK at this time of year, you'll see a lot of ordinary people walking around wearing plastic red noses. You'll see cars with big red noses on their radiators. You'll even see buildings with enormous red noses on them. For Red Nose Day has become a new sort of folk festival in a country which already has enough tradition to be going on with. And this is a fundraising event, pure and simple.

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You won't find things like this in textbooks and I use them as examples of that more pluralist tradition we have here. For, while fundraising as a trade may be relatively new in the UK, philanthropy as a social activity is age-old and continues robustly. We have over 180,000 registered charities in the UK; most of them have survived and prospered without recourse to the new black arts of direct mail, tele-marketing, and big gift programs.

### Enter the Black Arts

It has all happened since the Second World War. Before then, it is probably true to say that our charities were agencies whereby the wealthier classes acted out their philanthropy to the poor. In

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other words, they were class-bound, inbred, and only rarely involved in good works beyond our shores. Mass communication rarely came into it—fundraising was a clannish thing.

One charity and one man changed all this. The charity was the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, shortly to become Oxfam; the man was Harold Sumption, an adman but, more important, a Quaker. Oxfam's first remit was aid to war-torn Europe, sending clothing, food, and medical help throughout the world. By the early '60s, it had become

achieve such results and they are almost certainly non-replicable outside the UK.

By the mid-'60s, 400,000 Oxfam supporters constituted the first computerized file of charity names. For direct mail now had entered the lexicon of fundraising. And a whole new generation of charities now wanted to emulate Oxfam. Charity ads became commonplace. Direct mail appeals began to be regular features in all our mailboxes. Fundraising grew exponentially during the '70s and '80s. A trade association emerged; a plethora of agencies and service companies began to grow up; the fundraising budgets of leading charities expanded like balloons.

*The black arts had arrived.* Not just ever more sophisticated mails but telephone fundraising, legacy marketing, upgrading programs, committed giving schemes, broadcast appeals—the works. It was a sudden explosion of charity communication and it was not always welcome or successful. Mailed appeals got to be called junk mail, press advertising became arty-farty, and we soon succumbed to a national bout of what became known as “donor fatigue.”

Let me share with you two conference anecdotes:

I was at an NSFRE convention a few years back, following a track in which three teams of top creative honchos were given an assignment as an exercise—a mailing for a local symphony orchestra, as I remember. They returned at the end of the conference with their creative recommendations: three mailing packs which looked exactly the same, said exactly the same things, and made exactly the same offer. The irony of this extraordinary creative symmetry went totally unnoticed by the audience. Indeed, the



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convener warbled over the fact—"great minds obviously think alike," he said. The conventional wisdom was reinforced—three top creative honchos had, after all, independently reached the same conclusion. And everyone was happy. No one seemed to mind that the packs were crap. And the skeptical Brit in the audience sure wasn't going to spoil the party.

I tried to say some of this at the International Fundraising Workshop a little while later. I offered my own pragmatic experience that the old model of long, four-page letters was beginning to founder on the basis that they had become a formula and that, maybe, people couldn't be bothered to read them any more—a thesis which was thankfully endorsed also by Jennie Thompson from the States. Up jumped a dour Dutchman. "But, George," he said, "this is a complete contradiction of what you were telling us five years ago." I struggled to make the point about a changing world, readers'

boredom thresholds and all that. I struggled and I failed. The man's face spoke of savage disappointment at such whimsicality. He made a big note on his pad. I fancy it said, "George Smith is a contradictory prat." In Dutch, of course.

**When the practice of fundraising becomes inexplicable to the donors who finance it, then something quite terrible will have happened.** I think the process has started. Direct marketing, or at least direct mail, has become far too central to fundraising. It is inevitably an expensive and a random means of raising funds. It has wastage, phenomenal wastage, built in. We must learn to temper its excesses. ■

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