



Are We Talking to Ourselves?

One of the great success stories of British fundraising holds vital lessons for us all.

BY GEORGE SMITH

I fear we're talking to ourselves. Our public is jaded, our techniques are shrill, and the whole notion of charity has somehow become less warm, less holy. As I noted in a previous article, fundraising has become a tribal patois.¹ It has fed on itself through every textbook and seminar and is now at risk of becoming a self-parody. We all know that most fundraising communication fails to secure a response. Yet, we are strangely quiescent about this fact. We increasingly concentrate on the statistical science of our business, rarely discussing how often we fail because we have stopped communicating.

My case is simple: too much fundraising communication is formulaic, predictable, presumptuous, and dismissable. Which is why it is ignored.

Our prime purpose is to raise money, not to send mailings. Let me suggest how we can do this better:

By treating the donor more intelligently . . . Direct mail appeals are stilted, boring, formulaic, and generally pretty stupid. In my copy seminars, I now persuade people to read their copy out loud. Does it sound like someone talking, I ask? It rarely does.

Why not? A letter is a communication by one human being to another. Too many fundraising letters show their database origins: they are communications written by a machine to a list.

By treating the donor with candor . . . I once wrote a mailing for a really boring little constitutional reform organization. In it, I said how stupid it was that we had to send mailings to intelligent people four times a year and raise the costs of running the office. I offered them the ability to "opt out" from the mailing program if they committed to a standing order that would save both of us all this hassle. Result: Eleven percent response and a wad of standing orders that continue to this day. And, a postbag full of congratulatory letters!

People aren't stupid. They know what you are trying to do. But, if you can find new and more honest ways of doing it, then they will more likely respond. Think of the political analogy: we can't stand politicians any more because they all say the same things that offend our intelligence. The first politician who says that she or he won't cut taxes may not get elected, but she or he'd probably do surprisingly well. And the first charity

that says it just had a really lousy year will also have a surprisingly good response on its hands.

By asking for more . . . Harvey McKinnon from Vancouver, Canada, has said that between three and five percent of any supporters' file will make a sizeable monthly contribution if the idea is presented imaginatively and powerfully enough. I agree.

Asking for more may sound like a strange way out of the direct mail morass. In fact, it's a necessary derivative of increased mailing costs, ferocious competition, and soaring recruitment costs. Fundraisers simply have no choice but to ask for more. But how will they do it? Will they explore the donor's need to belong and find a language to evoke it? Will they depict a new excitement, a new responsibility, a new set of tasks to be discharged? Will they create a Sense of Event? Or will they just lash together the old cliches, the old treatments, the old tradecraft, and peer myopically at the spreadsheets?

Yes, it can be done . . . Greenpeace UK put all these lessons together a few years back and launched a scheme called "Frontline."² It sounded zany. This most trenchant of environmental groups, popularly believed to be supported only by aging hippies and tree-hug-

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gers, asked a proportion of their supporters to give 20 pounds a month on standing order. The donor rewards were comparatively slender: the occasional video, a recycled briefing or two from Head Office, invitations to public meetings. For 240 pounds a year! No British cause group can ever have taken such a deep breath to ask for such support.

Greenpeace's "Frontline" is one of the great success stories of current British fundraising. "Frontline" now has over 4,000 members, and income from the scheme represents over 10 percent of the organization's entire annual income. Truly, you don't get what you don't ask for.

Now, no one called this a major donor program or even a committed-giving scheme. The promotion was free of fundraising jargon. It just offered you a better way of belonging to Greenpeace, a more clear-cut depiction of the dream that underpins that admirable organization. And people were willing to pay 250 pounds to belong.

I wish I could tell you that all British charities are like Greenpeace. But, truth to tell, many British charities are inherently conservative. Latecomers to the black arts of direct mail, telemarketing, and big gift programs, they are still in the first stage of devil-worship. We've reached the same market state as American fundraisers. We need to cut new paths through the forest of public indifference. Given the relative absence of magisterial vested interests here, the new pathfinding probably has more provenance on our side of the Atlantic.

The breakthrough will come through a combination of market forces and a better understanding of the need for warm, human communication. The first will be

triggered by diminishing returns on current unthinking fundraising investment; the second will happen as charities begin to apply the lessons, the very simple and practical lessons, set out in *Relationship Fundraising*.³ This book has already spawned a sort of counter-theology among the fundraising chattering classes.

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"Frontline."

Yet the book—and the idea—serves to sit there for generations as the only vital text for our business. I can think of nothing more depressing than the fact it is now seen as somehow controversial or at least simplistic.

We must honor the true and passionate instinct by which people want to give us money to do good. If we insist on masking that instinct with dumb, repetitive pseudo-tradecraft, then we shall indeed have failed to communicate. ■

Footnotes

¹See "How We Don't Communicate" in the January-February 1998 issue of *Nonprofit World*.

²A fuller narrative on Frontline is available in *Growing from Good to Great: Positioning Your Fund-Raising Efforts for BIG Gains*, by Judith E. Nichols, Chicago: Bonus Books.

³This bestselling book, sold in 32 countries, and its sequel, *Friends for Life*, were written by Ken Burnett, London: White Lion Press. You may contact him at Burnett Associates, White Lion Court, 7 Garret Street, London EC1Y 0TY United Kingdom (phone 171-490-4939; fax 171-490-3126). For a bargain price on *Friends for Life*, call Fran Bierman at 800-424-7367.

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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