



United We Stand?

Increasingly, nonprofits are being asked to speak with one voice. But are we up to the challenge?

BY JEREMY HUGHES

We in England, as in the rest of the world, are being pressured to reach out beyond our own nonprofit organization—even our own country—to other nonprofits so as to maximize our impact. Are we up to this demand? Are we “joined up” enough in our thinking to meet the challenge of social, welfare, and environmental issues throughout the world? How connected are we as a sector? Are we united enough to leverage our effectiveness in delivering services and influencing policy? Can we act together to increase charitable support—not just in our own nation but around the globe?

We live in a market-driven society. Just as with a commercial brand, each charity must develop a “unique selling proposition” that differentiates it from competitors. This is then used to produce a compelling case for support—indeed one that’s seen as more compelling than that of other charities.

In fundraising, competition is the name of the game. Donors decry being “bombarded with junk mail” and “pestered by unwanted phone calls.” But the reality is that using these techniques produces more money not just for individual chari-

ties but for groups of charities as well. When I was at NCH Action for Children, 10 years ago, research showed that donors gave to several competing childcare charities. If NCH and the Children’s Society merged, as some advocated at the time, then there would be a reduction in total voluntary income.

It’s not just in public awareness and fundraising that we must temper competition with cooperation. In our

service provision, we seldom work closely enough together. The Leonard Cheshire Foundation, at which I work, has only now—after 50 years of history—developed national service delivery partnerships. In groundbreaking moves, it now has agreements with such organizations as the MS Society. More are expected to follow in moves that put the needs of disabled people before the historical separation of different voluntary bodies.

Nonprofit Sector in U.K. Stands Alone

The U.K. voluntary sector is unique, according to the John Hopkins comparative nonprofit research project. It doesn’t fit the “corporatist” model found in other parts of northern Europe nor the “commercial” model which prevails in the U.S. Instead, it combines features of both.

The U.K. voluntary sector increasingly shares with the rest of northern Europe a reliance on the public sector. It shares with the U.S. a growing competition with the for-profit sector. But U.K. nonprofits differ markedly from those in the U.S. because they rarely charge fees, as U.S. nonprofits commonly do.

The study found some surprises when it comes to the size of nonprofit sectors around the world. Particularly large nonprofit sectors are to be found in the Netherlands, Israel, and Belgium, where nonprofit employment as a proportion of all employment is significantly higher than in the U.S. (normally assumed to be the country with the most extensive nonprofit sector). The U.K.’s nonprofit sector is slightly above average in size.



Few forums bring trustees together from different and competing charities.

At a professional level, bodies do exist that bring us together. But our governance is by volunteers, and there is seldom a forum that brings trustees together from different and competing charities. Many charities also struggle to bring their senior volunteers up to date with the latest thinking and current practice. Trustees are a central attribute of charities. We must keep them from acquiring the characteristics of many corporate board members. Too often I have seen snoozing through company business after a good lunch.

To develop as we should requires collective action and commitment. I suggest one simple starting point—a system of “trustee exchange” whereby charities exchange one trustee with another charity for six months, with a day-long seminar at the end to share and learn from experiences.

In preparing for the future, we must work together both locally and globally. Only then can we break out into new levels of awareness and support for the voluntary sector and ever better ways of meeting the demands of the causes we espouse. ■

Selected References

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These resources are available through the Society’s Resource Center, 608-274-9777, Ext. 221, www.danenet.org/snpo.

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