

Show Me the Need



By Elizabeth McDaniel

Cut through jargon and political correctness to convey real need to donors.

“Do you know how many starving children there are in the world?”

Angelina Jolie captures imaginations with that question. In providing an answer to her query, however, many organizations responsible for feeding those kids here in the United States would respond by saying:

“Sixteen million American children live with food insecurity.”¹

These two attention grabbers may be trying to make the same point. The second may even make that point with more precision. But it fails to pack much of a punch. Why? Because it confuses a simple, relatable condition — hunger — with a vague, politically correct phrase about “food insecurity.”

What does “food insecurity” mean to someone who’s reading a charity’s case for support or an e-appeal on the Net? Does it have something to do with the safety of the food supply? With our families’ attitudes about food? With an impending food shortage or one that’s already here? And while “food insecurity” doesn’t sound like a particularly good thing, it doesn’t sound terribly horrific either.

Use Your Most Powerful Tool — Vibrant Language

It’s disturbing when organizations advocating on behalf of truly, tragically hungry and poor Americans insist on using unclear, deadened terminology like “food insecure,” “economically

challenged,” and “underprivileged.” Terms like this have a way of sterilizing conversations about the darker realities of life. It’s so much easier to hear about underprivileged kids facing food insecurity than about the poor kids down the street who have to root through a neighbor’s trash to find some supper.

Nonprofits may shy away from such vivid images to “protect the dignity” of the people they serve. But using dull, colorless language is no way to preserve dignity. When human beings are ground into the dirt by poverty, their suffering is mocked by a term like “economic insecurity.” There’s a bitter irony in any effort to preserve people’s dignity when our language trivializes the real needs they face, making their lives seem less painful than they are.

“You need to cut through professional jargon to make your point clear.”

When hazy, abstract terminology invades fundraising communication, there’s a good chance that donors will stop listening. Such terminology robs the message of any sense of need, any urgency, any notion that there really is a problem that must be solved.

And it saps the truth out of the message ... a truth that most Americans never have a

first-hand chance to see, and can only learn from the charities that serve the most vulnerable, most invisible people in our land. While the existence of hunger and poverty in America — even right there in a donor’s neighborhood — can be a hard reality for many to wrap their heads around, euphemisms like “economic challenges” actually work to reinforce the myth that no one is really hungry or desperately poor in America.

Rather than making the needs of suffering Americans more visible, this kind of language blunts a donor’s perception of need

¹See <http://feedingamerica.org/faces-of-hunger/hunger-101/child-hunger-facts.aspx>.

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and covers up the real human misery behind it. So, the neediest of the needy remain invisible — even to donors who may have the will and capacity to help them.

It’s our responsibility as nonprofit professionals to use all the tools at our disposal to meet the needs of the communities we serve. We do a great disservice by anesthetizing language, one of our most powerful tools.

Enter the Heart of the Donor

One reason that well-intentioned organizations go astray in this way is a reluctance to leave behind the institutional mindset and enter the psyche of a donor. While facts and figures may impress and compel us in our nonprofit work, it’s different for the majority of donors. They give from the heart, not from the head. That’s why Angelina Jolie’s question about “starving children” has so much more appeal than the statistic that answers her question in terms of “food insecurity.”

Before you give anyone the facts about hunger in your community, tell them about six-year-old Sam sneaking food home from school lunch in his pockets so he’ll have something to eat over the weekend. The emotional impact of a story will beat out facts and statistics every single time.

Another reason why organizations water down fundraising communication is a preference to focus on their successes, rather than on the needs of the people they serve. They believe that donors will be more motivated to give if they stress the positive and spare them the gloom and doom.

But it’s precisely the doom and gloom that draws the donors’ response. Donors want to feel like they’re truly making a difference. They want to believe that their gifts are rescuing children or animals or the environment from impending calamity. If an organization stresses how they’ve met one need after another, it may leave a donor wondering: “Great. So, what do you need me for?”

An anecdote from Save the Children provides a clear illustration of this principle.² Several years ago, a board member complained that their well-known infomercials “consisted of nothing but unrelenting misery.” He asked, “Can’t we say something about the good things we do? Surely that will motivate people to give.”


Save the Children tested his theory. In a new spot, 20 out of the 60 seconds consisted of program information. Although the change was relatively small — enough to go consciously unnoticed by viewers — the difference in response was dramatic.

²David Trim, vice president of the Russ Reed Agency, shared this information shared during a roundtable at the DMA NonProfit Federation.

“The language you use can trivialize real needs.”

While the original spot brought new donors in for \$165, the new spot cost \$280 per new donor — a \$115 difference. That’s \$115 out of the mouths of hungry kids.

If we’re truly concerned about the dignity of the people who suffer the tragic indignities of poverty and hunger, we shouldn’t run from the truths that haunt their lives. These miserable conditions will only persist if we allow them to remain invisible, if we mask and gloss over the hardships they endure.

It’s up to us to tell their story, to harness the power of real and visceral language to make people believe in the needs we know so well. So, show donors the need, and there’s a good chance they’ll show you the money. 



As senior writer at Blue Crane Creative (bluecranecreative.com, mcdaniel.elizabeth@gmail.com, Elizabeth McDaniel works as a copy writer for a number of national charities.



Your Communication Toolbox

Find more communication tools at NonprofitWorld.org. Here is a sampling:

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication (Vol. 24, No. 6)

How to Write a Fundraising Letter (Vol. 29, No. 5)

Telling the Story: Exploring Clients’ Lives (Vol. 17, No. 1)

How Do Effective Nonprofit Leaders Communicate? (Vol. 13, No. 1)