



Use Campaigning to Win Support for Your Cause

Campaigning can be more effective than fundraising in gaining support, as many global nonprofits have discovered. Here's some hard-earned advice from Great Britain.

BY PAUL BRANNEN

In Great Britain—as in the United States—most charities have steered clear of being “political,” cautious about losing their tax-exempt status. In both the U.K. and U.S., however, revised guidelines permit quite a bit of campaigning without risking tax-exemption. (See “Selected References”.) Thus, it’s worth exploring whether you can achieve your aims better with campaigning than with fundraising.

Global nonprofits, from Greenpeace to Christian Aid (a British nonprofit that tackles the root causes of world poverty) have discovered that an emphasis on raising funds can backfire. People begin to associate a nonprofit’s name with requests for money. Thus, they lose the enthusiasm and sense of connection that make an organization strong.

Sometimes campaigning can be more effective than fundraising in eliciting support. Too often we link the notion of charity to giving money. But fundraising shouldn’t be an end in itself. After all, no charity was set up solely to raise money; the money is raised for a purpose, the realization of the cause.

Advantages Campaigning Can Bring to your Cause

• **Campaigning can be the most effective way to reach an objective.** The campaign to get the Channel Tunnel Rail Link running through a tunnel in Islington, London, rather than over ground was won through lobbying, not through raising large sums of money.

• **Campaigning involves and empowers people.** Giving a check takes a few minutes. It’s a far different matter to stand outside a supermarket encouraging customers to ask the manager to stock fairly-traded goods from the Third World on behalf of Christian Aid or Oxfam. People who give up their weekend to campaign can’t help but feel involved in the organization’s work.

• **Campaigning recognizes the value of time.** The giving of time clearly adds involvement. There are dozens of ways to involve campaigners in support of your cause—collecting names on petitions, speaking at meetings, writing letters, staffing a booth, lobbying officials, and taking part in demonstrations.

• **Campaigning doesn’t exclude people.** Campaigning can involve everyone in some way. The Thursday Team at Christian Aid, for example, is a group of people with severe disabilities who go into the office

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every Thursday to do basic tasks such as stuffing envelopes.

- **Campaigning can educate people.** When Christian Aid ran a series of ads relating to unfair trade as a cause of poverty—not asking for money but asking people to join its campaign—over 9,000 people responded. If a similar weight of advertising had been dedicated to raising funds, a response of 1,500 would have been deemed a success. Of those responding, 95% were new names and addresses to Christian Aid.

- **Campaigning overcomes the limits of money.** Bob Geldof and BandAid raised huge sums of money but, ultimately, scenes of starving children in Africa returned to TV. When it comes to tackling Third World poverty, giving money is simply not enough. The whole political, economic, and social system that runs the planet needs to be changed. We must face our donors with greater honesty and make these hard facts clear.

- **Campaigning can lead to increased support.** People are more likely to support an organization they believe is actively doing something to rectify a problem. Greenpeace “stunts” are a very small part of its overall work, but these campaigns get Greenpeace into the news. If supporters are asked to back up these high-profile campaigns with their own campaign actions, many will. This creates a stronger bond between the organization and donor. This, in turn, strengthens the organization as a whole, making it more likely to achieve its aims.

How You Can Encourage Support through Campaigning

Many U.S. nonprofits practice a form of elitism connected to lobbying and advocacy work: Supporters are expected to contribute dollars but leave campaign work to the staff. The argument is that the issues involved are too complex.

Yes, the issues may well be complex. For example, the reasons for poverty are varied and complicated. But, just as supporters don’t need to understand all these reasons in deciding to give money or solicit others, neither

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TRADE FOR CHANGE

Dear store manager

As a customer at your store I would like to see you stocking goods from the Third World which give poor people a fair return for their labour.

Yours faithfully

Signed.....Name.....

Address.....

.....

To the customer

If you support fair trade and would like to see Third World farmers having decent wages and working conditions, please sign this coupon and hand it in at your local supermarket or store. Give it to the manager, an assistant or the person on the checkout.

To the retailer

For further information about fairly traded goods contact Nick Isles at Christian Aid, PO Box 100, London SE1 7RT.

ChristianAid

Vouchers are an easy way to activate supporters.

do they need to understand all the issues in order to take a campaign action.

Here are some of the most important things you can do:

- **Produce materials that clarify complex issues.** Break these issues down so that interested people who aren’t experts can act on them.

- **Develop simple campaign actions for supporters to undertake.** And remember that what sounds simple may not be so in practice. Many organizations, for example, urge their supporters, “Write your congressional representative or senator.” A mere six words, an instant call to action. Simple, right? Not at all. There are many drawbacks to requesting this action:

- Most people don’t know who their representatives or senators are.
- Some people can’t write.
- Many people won’t take the time and effort to write and mail the letter.



Far from empowering supporters, your organization may have neutralized them or—even worse—caused them to turn away. You must motivate by presenting easy-to-understand and simple-to-perform actions.

• **Create a campaign that supporters can undertake easily in the course of their daily lives.** Here are two examples that work:

- Christian Aid encouraged its supporters to hand in “vouchers” when paying for their supermarket purchases. These vouchers asked stores to consider stocking fairly-traded goods from the Third World. Since people go shopping in the course of their daily routine, Christian Aid wasn’t asking them to go out of their way in taking this action. Nor were they asking people to talk with the store managers about fair trade, which would have been intimidating to many. Rather, supporters were asked simply to hand over a small card to the cashier.

- Christian Aid ran a campaign critical of the World Bank and IMF in the developing world. The issues were complex and difficult. But the campaign action step was simple: Supporters were asked to sign a postcard and send it to the World Bank in London. While many Christian Aid supporters understood the issue, the reason that thousands acted decisively was that the action was easy.

So, the challenge is to find simple, accessible campaign actions on a par with asking supporters to empty the loose change out of their pockets or to write a check. If nonprofits don’t meet this challenge and focus on the importance of campaigning as a way to support their cause, they may pay a heavy price. Not because they don’t need money—they do and always will—but because they need people to give *and* campaign. ■

Selected References

- “Lobby? You?,” *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1991.
Tesdahl, Ben, “Have You Registered Under the New Lobbying Act?,” *Nonprofit World*, July-August 1996.
Tesdahl, D. Benson, “How to Lobby without Breaking the Law,” *Nonprofit World*, September-October 1996.
Smucker, Bob, *The Nonprofit Lobbying Guide*.

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

Paul Brannen is area coordinator for Christian Aid (Denewood, Clayton Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K. NE2 1TL, phone 191-281-5955, fax 191-281-5655). He is a contributor to Lessons from Abroad, from which this article is excerpted. The book is available from the Society’s Resource Center, included in this issue (or call the Society at 800-424-7367 to order). More information is also available from Judith Nichols, Ph.D., CFRE, 785 Ninth Street, Lake Oswego, Oregon 97034 (phone and fax 503-635-2483). Christian Aid is the official emergency relief and development agency of 40 British and Irish churches. It works where the need is greatest, regardless of race or religion, in more than 60 countries in the Third World.