

The Need for Donor Education

1,200 words

Should fundraisers be doing more to educate the public?

Voluntary organisations have a number of 'touch points' with the public – channels through which they communicate directly with individuals. These include familiar media such as mailings, TV advertising, street fundraisers and websites.

Much of the information that these organisations communicate through these touch points is developed to engage the public in some form of action in order to achieve a particular strategic aim. These aims include political campaigning and gaining behaviour change (on matters such as the environment, fair trade, protecting animals etc.), but perhaps the one that uses the highest share of the 'communications pie' is fundraising.

Within our sector, it is generally accepted that fundraising communications need to take a certain form if they are to be successful. This form could broadly be described as snappy, straightforward, emotive and focussed on gaining immediate action. Many, although not all, voluntary organisations still employ this approach.

Whilst this 'quick-fire' approach may (and only *may*) be an effective method of raising short-term funds, it may not be an appropriate way to achieve the long-term goal of educating the public.

But why should fundraisers worry about educating the people they reach with their communications? For the simple reason that, by educating people (including adults), voluntary organisations can more effectively engage their long-term support and cooperation in seeking many of their strategic aims, including fundraising.

This requires a particular type of education - one that aims to help people develop perspective on the world and their own situation as individuals. It includes the provision of accessible information on areas such as: the issue(s) that the organisation is concerned with, the root causes of the issue, the context of the issue within the world at large (including historical and political context), the influence that the individual themselves has on the issue and how the issue relates to the moral values the individual may hold. Also, how the organisation's work fits in.

The main benefits of this education are as follows: firstly, it makes people better informed about the world and able to reach decisions for themselves. In turn, this seems likely to make their commitment to any issue or action deeper and more long-lasting once they've decided to make it. It also enables people to engage more effectively with the organisation's overall goals. At present, an environmental organisation's failure to educate could compromise its strategic aims by allowing supporters to slip into inconsistent behaviour – e.g. a donor's £10 gift could be overshadowed by their lack of awareness of the impact of their frequent air travel on the environment.

Secondly, this education has an effect on a person's willingness and ability to engage with the organisation on specific areas of its work. For example, in gaining behaviour change - an important strategic aim for many organisations. By understanding their own impact on a particular issue (e.g. climate change) better, an individual is more able to make changes to their own life to address the problem. Fundraisers may also benefit from a more educated public, as people will

have become more motivated to support the cause once they have developed a better knowledge of it. Existing donors may prove more loyal to an organisation's cause as they have a deeper understanding of its work and an even greater commitment to its values. Indeed, education could be a potentially useful solution to a key fundraising challenge of recent years – how to stem the attrition rates and improve the responsiveness of supporters recruited through direct dialogue methods.

Another overarching reason why education should matter specifically to fundraisers is this. If education does make the difference that I have suggested above, and fundraising is one of the main forms of direct communication that charities have with the public, it potentially represents a great vehicle (or conversely, a major missed opportunity) to deliver education to the public and thus help the overall organisation to pursue a number of its strategic aims.

So what steps should the sector take? Voluntary organisations depend on income and I am not suggesting that fundraising communications should be completely changed in order to make space for education. Fundraisers are always aiming to strike a balance between short term fundraising needs and more strategic, long term goals within their department and beyond. I suggest however that we need to make sure that we are focussing enough on the strategic side, in order to ensure that our fundraising strategies are supporting rather than hindering our overall organisational aims.

On the issue of public education, I suggest that the 'short vs. long-term' balance could be shifted a good deal further towards the longer-term aim of education without causing much detriment to short-term fundraising goals. Let us briefly consider how we could begin to incorporate educational considerations into fundraising communications plans.

Firstly, fundraising plans could feature an 'education strategy' component, which sets out the role that fundraising intends to play in educating the public, the (measurable) goals it is setting itself to achieve this and the specific ways it will deliver this.

The actual measures required to deliver greater education might not involve much adjustment to the style fundraisers already use in primary materials such as letter copy for appeals. It could simply be a question of:

- Adding educational materials to support existing communications – e.g. developing a separate microsite and briefing sheets to provide background information to support a particular fundraising appeal or including some additional educational materials in an appeal pack;
- In each fundraising communication, including a section that explicitly notes the organisation's commitment to promoting education about the issues it covers, acknowledges that the information in the communication is very brief and then encourages people to find out more, by pointing them towards the additional information that has been provided – either in the communication or elsewhere;
- Making people aware of other initiatives or outputs – from the charity or beyond – that they can use to learn more about the charity's area of concern, e.g. :
 - Community schemes (such as conversation cafes, lectures or discussion groups), to involve and educate people in the issues surrounding their work;
 - Short educational courses for adults and children alike;
 - Free educational materials;
 - Forums (of various kinds – from websites to local groups) in which people can discuss the issues relating to the organisation's work.

Having said this, why not also test the effect of adjusting the actual style of fundraising communications to include a greater educational focus? For example, in this age of media overload it might make a refreshing change for a member of the public to receive a fundraising pack that says 'we trust you to make your own mind up about whether to give to this appeal, so

we've included some information to help you do this. If you'd like any more, let us know – but we hope you'll choose to support us'.

These are of course very broad, initial suggestions but I hope they provide a starting point. By taking a strategic approach and considering public education as part of their role, fundraisers could help to instil within the public a deeper commitment to supporting their cause (in various ways) in the long term.

(c) Richard Docwra
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