

# Getting the message across

**Practical strategies to help charities to change the way stakeholders see them**

**A joint nfpSynergy/ImpACT Coalition production**

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## Summary and conclusions

- The public holds a variety of stereotypes in their heads about modern charities and how they work. These stereotypes are usually left undisturbed because charities have not prioritised addressing these gaps in understanding.
- However, this means that the public continue to believe that charities are not effective, that CEOs get paid too much, that fundraising is not effective, that admin costs are too high and that trustees are paid.
- Individual charities cannot tackle the big picture for the sector as a whole (that is why they should join the ImpACT coalition) but they can get the message across to their own stakeholders especially staff, volunteers, supporters and clients.
- We suggest that there are six ways to get messages about effectiveness across: pledges, tangible successes, testimonials, quartiles and surveys, wordbites, and confiding in stakeholders. Which of these ways are most appropriate will depend on individual organisations. Charities may well create some approaches of their own.
- Having decided on the message, the key to success is consistent, ubiquitous and unrelenting drizzling (meaning a little everywhere rather than a lot all at once) of messages through every communications channel that the organisation has.

## Part 1: The overall goal: communicating comfort and understanding to a charity's stakeholders

### Introduction

It's easy to talk about transparency, accountability, trust and confidence and those other charity sector terms. But talk is worth nothing. It is transforming people's understanding that matters. We must replace trust with evidence, supplant nagging doubts with knowledgeable donors and change 'how do I know' into 'I am impressed by.....'

This guide arose out of the work that nfpSynergy has been doing on the branding of charities and the public understanding of how modern charities work, and the work that the ImpACT Coalition has been doing on trying to change the way that charities are seen by their key stakeholders. The gap between how 21<sup>st</sup> century charities work and how the public think they work is huge. But while no individual charity can take on the world on its own, it can better inform its own supporters, staff and volunteers and other stakeholders. Looking at the existing literature we realised that there was a gap. There is plenty of academic writing on trust and confidence – but little on practical action.

Many people who read this will be fundraisers. However, we believe that the need to communicate more effectively runs far wider than just about fundraising and donors – though they are undoubtedly a key audience. We believe that volunteers, the general public, trustees, staff and journalists also need to understand how modern

charities work and need to be persuaded that they are effective. So we use the term 'stakeholders' to encapsulate this broader set of audiences.

This document is filled with practical ideas and strategies for getting the messages out of a charity's ideas bank and into a stakeholder's head. It is not easy to change people's perceptions, but by remorselessly drizzling these messages across a range of their own communications, charities can make a real difference.

The report is divided into three parts:

- This first part sets out the issues as we see them and the reason why it is so important to change the way that the public, donors, volunteers and other stakeholders see charities.
- Part two sets out six generic messages (i.e. common to all charities) that the ImpACT Coalition has identified that all charities need to get across to their own stakeholders in order to address key gaps in understanding.
- Part three sets out six approaches or strategies that can be used for getting charities' messages across. These may either be the kind of generic messages described in part two or messages specific to an individual charity.

### Communicating comfort and understanding

We see a simple dichotomy in communicating to stakeholders and we use the term 'stakeholders' deliberately. We think that there are two types of messages - messages that motivate and inspire and inform stakeholders, and messages that tackle worries and concerns head-on (see table 1). In the first type of communication, messages are wooing recipients with ideas that they have never thought about, such as how a charity has an impact or knows it is effective and so on. In the second type of message, a charity is tackling head-on the worries and concerns that are (probably) already in the heads of stakeholders. Table 1 summarises the nature and type of these messages and the different jobs that they need to do.

<b>Table 1: the two types of messages that need to be got across</b>	
<b>Motivating messages</b>	<b>Comforting messages</b>
Messages that increase motivation and inspiration by stakeholders	Messages that reduce worries and concerns
These kind of message increase: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Loyalty</li> <li>▪ Commitment</li> <li>▪ Passion</li> <li>▪ Understanding</li> </ul>	These kind of message reduce: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Doubts</li> <li>▪ Concerns</li> <li>▪ Worries</li> <li>▪ Niggles</li> </ul>
Stakeholders support you if you get these kind of messages right	Stakeholders leave you or are less committed without these kind of messages
Example: we help twice as many people out of homelessness compared to a year ago – for half the cost	Example: This leaflet only cost 7p

## **The stereotypes in stakeholders' heads: the case for prejudice**

In a document designed for charity readers we can only apologise for stereotyping stakeholders and asking readers to prejudice their own audiences. However we believe it is useful to try and caricature the nature of how the public see charities. More information about the evidence behind these stereotypes is available in the free reports section of nfpSynergy's website ([www.nfpsynergy.net/freereports](http://www.nfpsynergy.net/freereports)).

There are four overarching stereotypes about what concerns people: how money is raised, how money is spent, whether charities have an impact and a belief that charities are still amateurish. These four are shown in the box below.

There can be few people who work in or with the charity sector who haven't experienced the worries, concerns or misunderstandings that many people have about charities. These are usually at weddings or family gatherings as Uncle Bill bores you rigid with his own personal anecdotes about wastage or extravagance in charities.

One of our own personal favourite anecdotes is a regional fundraising manager for a health charity whose mother (who was a GP) was horrified that a person working in a charity should have a 'company' car. This was despite the fact that the fundraiser had to travel 35,000 miles a year in the course of their job. If a GP can't see why a fundraiser might need a company car then we are not dealing with the kinds of stereotype and misunderstanding that only affect tabloid-reading middle England.

The box below articulates a range of the thoughts that may typically go through people's heads. This is based on nfpSynergy's research. Everybody will have their own experiences of these kinds of worries and how they are articulated for specific charities.

### **What do supporters, stakeholders and the public worry about?**

#### **They worry about how money is spent and about waste, inefficiency or extravagance**

- How much does the Chief Executive earn?
- Does my donation all go on administration?
- Is all that aid being stolen?
- I hear hundreds of people work at their headquarters

#### **They worry about how money is raised and whether fundraising works or is cost-effective**

- How much does this fundraising cost?
- I never respond to telephone calls/junk mail from charities (so it must be a waste of money)
- I bet this appeal cost a bomb
- I can't bear those fundraisers on the street

#### **They worry about how charities work and the professionalisation of charities**

- [abc charity] can't be that big or complex or professional
- Why are there so many charities?
- Why does anybody have to be paid for such worthwhile work?

- Are charities regulated at all?

**They worry about the impact of charities (and their donation of time or money)**

- Is my donation really making a difference?
- Is it worth me giving up my time for this organisation?
- How does this charity really make a difference?
- [abc charity] is a household name charity and so if they were not doing a good job I would be told

The charity sector has a cross to bear that other sectors do not. Because the sector asks people to make donations or give time, people have a much greater concern (and sense of ownership) about how every penny of income is spent. This sense of ownership over how 'my money' is spent is compounded by the difficulty in knowing whether a charity is actually doing a good job.

Jan Carlson in his book *Moments of Truth* identified the problem for businesses of customers measuring things that cannot be seen, based on what they can see. So the average airline passenger has no idea whether an aircraft's engines have been properly serviced. But if they can see that an aircraft is dirty or the catering is poor or the check-in queue is very slow, then it is a short leap to say 'if they can't clean the plane properly how can I be sure the aircraft is safe?'

And this dilemma is accentuated in charities. If a customer spends £100 on an airline ticket or a supermarket shopping trip, they can look at their experience or their trolley of food and decide whether they got value for money. If a supporter gives £100 or five hours each week to a charity all they have to go on is their experience. So while there is not necessarily a relationship between the giving experiences of an individual and the service delivering capability of a charity, supporters go on their experience and what information they do have. So if Tesco has store managers paid £80,000 we do not care, provided our shopping experience and the value and quality of our goods in our supermarket trolley is high. If a charity pays a CEO £80,000 it becomes part of how the supporter sees their money being spent.

So this briefing is about helping to make sure that stakeholders' 'giving' experience is not the only way in which they judge the charities with which they are involved. Personal experience needs to be supplemented by evidence, ideas and information about the impact that a charity has on the world.

However the charity world is not alone in needing to overcome ignorance and prejudice.

For most of the eighties and nineties, Skoda cars were universally derided. When they were bought out by Volkswagen, the quality improved dramatically while the low price tag remained. Amongst many other strategies for changing people's attitudes to Skoda (including some excellent TV advertising), the marketing team came up with the notion of 'pub facts': simple clear facts that would prove a point down the pub when somebody was insulting Skoda to a Skoda owner: For example '*Skoda was 'What Car of the Year' three years in a row*'.

So the following pages provide some ideas for how a charity can develop a communication strategy that gets across attitude-changing messages on the effectiveness and impact of charities.

### **The evidence that the public do not understand charities**

nfpSynergy's extensive research into public understanding of charities has uncovered a range of ways in which the public do not understand or have muddled perceptions of charities.

- The public think less goes to the cause than actually does. When asked to estimate the actual amount of each donation that goes to beneficiaries, the average answer is 47p in each £1. The reality is closer to 65p.
- In general, trust in charities is very high among the public. Indeed, 42% trust them more than the government (though this represents a 6% decrease from last year) and 45% trust them more than companies (which is more encouragingly an increase of 6% from last year).
- Known named organisations have a lot more trust than generic 'charities'. Between 30% to just under 50% of the public trust household name charities 'a great deal' to spend their donations wisely (and overall their trust in the same organisations is at about the same level).
- Only 5% of the public strongly agree that 'I think it makes sense for charities to spend more of my donations on fundraising this year if it will increase their income for future years', with 31% agreeing less strongly.
- While street fundraising has taken the rap, only 34% of the public find it annoying / get too much of it, compared with doorstep fundraising at 39%, telephone fundraising at 43% and direct mail at 45%. In contrast, just 11% agree with the statement *'I like to receive mailings from charities I support and care about'*.
- Among the public the highest concerns about charities are the amount of money that goes to the charity (62%) and the amount that goes to the cause (54%). Related to these are concerns about amounts spent on administration (41%) and staff salaries (40%). There are high levels of concern for telephone calls (48%), direct mails (32%), door collections (32%) and street fundraising (21%).
- 48% of the public have heard of the Charity Commission, 43% have not.
- The majority of the public have mostly correct perceptions about which types of charity staff are paid and are unpaid. The three exceptions are presidents, who the majority (49%) incorrectly think are paid, fundraisers, who the majority (55%) incorrectly think are unpaid, and trustees where only 11% think they are definitely unpaid.
- When asked which fundraising techniques the public thought were most effective, people thought that charity shops were the most effective (88%) followed by collection boxes/tins (70%).

- Interestingly, when asked to compare techniques more respondents feel face to face fundraising (62%) is effective than TV advertising (55%). However, when asked about their feelings towards these methods of fundraising in separate questions, the positions reverse - 60% say they understand TV advertising is an effective way of raising money and only 16% say this regarding street fundraising. Only 7% of the public think that telephone calls at home are effective! Only 29% think that direct mail / appeal mailings are effective.



## **Part 2: Six key themes that every charity can communicate about how it works**

Here are the six themes that the ImpACT coalition believes that charities need to get across much better, to address some of the concerns that stakeholders have and to strengthen knowledge. It is not expected that the themes' words are used verbatim, rather that charities get the messages across in other ways. The six themes are:

Theme 1: Charities are effective and do a great job

Theme 2: To raise (more) money, charities have to spend money

Theme 3: Charities use donations carefully and wisely

Theme 4: Charities are highly regulated and adhere to a range of strict standards

Theme 5: Charities work together

Theme 6: Charities need the public's donations because they really do make a difference

### **Theme 1: Charities are effective and do a great job**

#### **Barrier or myth that is being tackled**

The public do not always believe or know that charities do a crucial job in vast swathes of society; neither do they believe they are necessarily effective in their work.

#### **The message in depth**

Charities play a number of key roles in society. They provide vital services and carry out cutting-edge research. They work with the groups that government can't or won't help. Many challenge the laws and government policies that hurt the people they work with. They come up with new ideas and innovations to work more effectively. And this is happening not just in one or two charities, but in thousands and thousands of charities up and down the country. Moreover, because charities are heavily funded by voluntary donations and need to compete to win every grant and every new source of money, they need to be particularly effective and efficient.

#### **The message in a nutshell**

Charities help thousands of people every day and because they have to earn every penny they use it more effectively and more innovatively.

An individual charity should be able to:

- Demonstrate the scale of their impact for the charity as a whole (i.e. we help xxx people, we run xxx projects) and for individual activities
- Create and utilise at least two compelling wordbites which show the difference they make through their work, e.g. we find jobs for disabled people at half the cost of the Government
- Use examples of individual people as case studies and examples of effectiveness in action
- Repeatedly use the key wordbites below that show the effectiveness - for example on letterheads, in conversation, in advertising

- Model wordbites which explain the impact of a whole charity
- We are the largest provider of social care after the Government.
- We helped xxx thousand people this year/ we help xxx people per week/per day
- Without your help/xxx more people would have died from cancer/xxx more children would still be suffering/be homeless
- xxx people lived/are alive today because of research funded by you
- If we didn't do this, no else would

## **Theme 2: To raise (more) money, charities have to spend money**

### **Barrier or myth that is being tackled**

The public is ambivalent, at best, about the wisdom of spending money on fundraising in order to raise additional funds in the long run. Since spending money to raise money is at the heart of most fundraising strategies, this lack of public buy-in is problematic - to put it mildly.

### **The message in depth**

Fundraising for charities is not an easy task. It requires professionalism, imagination, rigour and expertise. As more charities raise money, fundraising gets harder and more competitive. Charities seek to increase their fundraising capacity: more staff, more supporters, more events and/or more direct appeals. All of this costs money – but charities know that the rewards are high – it just takes time. If supporters want their favourite charities to grow, the best way to do this is to endorse their investment in fundraising.

### **The message in a nutshell**

More donations let us do more work – and by spending some of today's donations for tomorrow's income we can raise more money and help more people.

### **Complementary/additional messages that need to be communicated**

We fundraise responsibly and are members of the Fundraising Standards Board and the Institute of Fundraising.

### **As a minimum an individual charity should be able to:**

- Give supporters 'pub facts' which demonstrate their overall or specific fundraising effectiveness
- Guide supporters to support them in the most cost-effective way
- Continually watch their costs/income ratio to identify and address poorly performing fundraising functions
- Continuously explain how investment in fundraising is both necessary and universal (all large charities do it)
- Never appear to defend high expense or wastage or condemn those who keep their costs down

### **Wordbites that explain why fundraising is cost-effective and important**

- For every £1 spent on fundraising we spend another £xxx on saving lives etc
- Each leaflet costs just xxxp and could help save a life etc.
- Fundraising and management costs ensure we can do more and do it better for those we help
- We use professional staff and committed volunteers to make a difference

### **Wordbites that explain how supporters' wishes are put centre stage**

- We only phone supporters who have given us permission to ring them
- We only swap your name and address with your permission
- We allow supporters to influence how their money is invested
- We respect the right of supporters to question how we spend their money

### **Wordbites that explain how fundraising works and is effective**

- Message for F2F collector bibs – 'I am paid, as this work saved the lives of xxx people last year etc'
- We include a pen as it encourages/ makes it easier for people to support our work and (if overprinted) means that you can promote us by using it.
- For every £1 donated, xxxp goes directly to saving lives/ funding life-saving research/ combating poverty etc
- If you are not happy with our work, we will give you your donation back

## **Theme 3: Charities use donations carefully and wisely**

### **Barrier or myth that is being tackled**

The public want constant and tangible evidence that an organisation is keeping its costs down and not wasting money. But supporting charities is not like shopping at Tesco – there is no trolley of goods that a supporter can evaluate to decide if they got good value. So supporters and the public go on what they can see: evidence of waste and inefficiency (or just the perception of waste).

### **The message in depth**

Charities battle in a thousand ways to keep their costs down. This does not mean they do not spend money – but they use money wisely. This may be by tendering for major contracts, by using the internet for purchasing, or reducing the size of mailings. Volunteers make donations go further because they help keep costs down by giving their time for free (although not all jobs can be done by volunteers).

### **The message in a nutshell**

Charities never stop trying to keep their costs down and where they do spend money, it's because they know it is justified.

### **Complementary/additional messages that need to be communicated**

For a range of tasks, volunteers allow charities to do more for less.

**As a minimum individual charities should be able to:**

- Demonstrate numerous tangible examples (pub facts) of how they keep costs down – so saying ‘trust us’ to somebody who feels they get too many mailings (for example) is not necessarily effective in changing their perception.
- Communicate to supporters where expenditure has yielded results.
- Defend instances of high expenditure or perceived high expenditure (e.g. CEO’s salary).

**Wordbites that demonstrate carefulness with funds**

- All of our post is sent out second class.
- We provide information free of charge, but if you can afford to make a contribution we can reach more people.
- ‘Please re-use or recycle me’ message on all bags.
- We use email to save money and time.
- We use the telephone to contact supporters because it saves money (i.e. it has a better ROI).
- Nobody travels first class at our expense.
- Please tick the box if you would like to help us save money by not acknowledging your donation.
- Please accept our thanks now, and tick the box to say you do not need a receipt and help save money
- Every leaflet is an opportunity to find a new supporter to our cause
- If you do not wish to support us, please pass this mailing/insert on to a friend.

**Wordbites that help show the importance of volunteers**

- The trustees who run our organisation are unpaid (volunteers).
- Telephone response lines – if not available use recorded messages to explain it is staffed by volunteers.
- Xxx% of work is done by volunteers to whom we only pay expenses
- Sign explaining that staff are volunteers.
- Our volunteers work for almost nothing.
- Xxx% of our income is raised by volunteers who give their time for free.
- Face to face/Shop environment - “I am a volunteer. I don’t get paid, but ask me what I do get”.
- Many of the people you meet here are volunteers.

**Theme 4: Charities are highly regulated and adhere to a range of strict standards**

**Barrier or myth that is being tackled**

Charities are unregulated and it would be very easy for somebody to defraud them or steal their money, or for them to use my money in ways that nobody knows about.

### **The message in depth**

Charities are regulated. They are regulated by the Charity Commission in England and Wales and/or OSCR in Scotland and, in certain cases, Companies' House. Certain fundraising activities are regulated by the Financial Services Authority, Ofcom, National Audit Office, Audit Commission, Gaming Commission and by their local authorities. They are regulated by HM Revenue and Customs in relation to tax-effective giving and the taxes we pay and reclaim. And, of course, self-regulation launches in 2007.

### **The message in a nutshell**

Charities are regulated – you do not need to worry.

### **Complementary/additional messages that need to be communicated**

Charities regulate themselves through the Fundraising Standards Board (and the Institute of Fundraising's codes of fundraising practice).

### **As a minimum individual charities should be able to:**

- Tell stakeholders they are regulated by the Charity Commission.
- Sign up to self-regulation through the Fundraising Standards Board.
- Constantly reinforce the nature of charity regulation by drizzling it across a range of a charity's communications.

### **Wordbites that demonstrate charities are regulated**

- Charities are regulated by the Charity Commission.
- We are a registered charity, our number is \*\*\*\*\*.
- We operate the highest standards of financial control and accountability.
- We produce accounts every year.
- We adhere to over 20 codes of practice set out by the Institute of Fundraising.
- We abide by the Fundraising Standards Board's Fundraising Promise because supporters have rights and we respect them.
- If you would like a copy of the Fundraising Promise, you can write to xyz, telephone xyz, or go online to [www.xyz.org.uk](http://www.xyz.org.uk)
- You can request a copy of our Annual Report and Accounts free of charge from xyz.
- We are regulated by the Charity Commission to make sure we meet the legal requirements of charities. We are regulated by the Inland Revenue in relation to gift aid and share giving. We are regulated by Customs and Excise for the VAT we pay and reclaim. We are regulated by Ofcom and the ASA for our advertising. We are regulated by the FSA for our affinity credit card. We are regulated by the National Audit Office for our expenditure of government funds.

## **Theme 5: Charities work together**

### **Barrier or myth that is being tackled**

There are too many charities and they don't work together.

### **The message in depth**

Charities work together in a whole myriad of ways. One recent study showed that charities typically had xxx charity partners. Charities often work together in ways that the public do not see – such as delivering services or cutting costs. But charities also do not work together when they think they can try something new or different or innovative.

### **The message in a nutshell**

Charities work together when it makes sense – and don't when it doesn't!

### **Complementary/additional messages that need to be communicated**

Nobody wants all the banks or supermarkets to merge into one – so why is everybody so keen for charities to merge.

### **As a minimum individual charities should be able to:**

- Let stakeholders know about the partners they have through mailings, email footers and letterheads.

### **Wordbites to demonstrate that charities do work together**

- We work with others to make sure we maximise the benefit we provide.
- Every charity's work is important and we do work together.
- We work with local social services to xxx.
- We work with local partners in the countries we work in.
- We share office space with other charities to save administration costs.
- We work with other charities to determine who is best placed to undertake specific work.
- If we cannot help, we will find another charity that can.
- We share our fundraising knowledge and expertise to make the most of our fundraising.
- We, along with other overseas charities, have formed the Disasters Emergency Committee.
- We belong to a charity consortium to share the cost of promoting legacies.
- This project is jointly funded by X and Y.
- X and Y are working together to ensure that Z gets the best deal.

## **Theme 6: Charities need the public's donations because they really do make a difference**

### **Barrier or myth that is being tackled**

Individual donations don't make a difference because charities are so large and donations are wasted

### **The message in depth**

Many charities survive only because of the individual donations they receive. Sometimes these donations are all they have, and in other cases donations make the difference between a good service funded by government and a great one. And charities are grateful for donations. They try to say thank you directly – but sometimes it is more effective to get on with putting the donation to good use.

### **The message in a nutshell**

Thank you, thank you, thank you – your donations do make a difference: to us, to our work and to the people we exist to help.

### **Complementary/additional messages that need to be communicated**

- Individual donations make a difference.
- Charities need your support and people's lives will be changed by it.
- Donations & voluntary income are important to charities.

### **As a minimum individual charities should be able to:**

- Develop simple wordbites which help supporters understand how their donations make a difference and how effectively they are used.
- Make clear to stakeholders from where the organisation procures its income.
- In this context 'more is more' in order to build up a generalised awareness of the importance of donations to charities

### **Wordbites that explain the importance of donations overall**

- No gift is too small; every penny helps us do our work.
- Without you and thousands like you, X would be without our support.
- However you give, we thank you. We need your kind gifts, your time and your input to ensure our work continues. Whichever way you choose to support, we hope you'll continue to do so.
- However you give - thank you.
- Our work is only possible with public donations.
- "ABC is a charity that relies on public donations to carry out its work" on every envelope/communication piece.
- Our work is only possible with public donations.
- Without your support our work for the animals/children etc simply would not happen.
- % of our work is funded by public donations.

### **Wordbites that make specific links between donations and how they are used**

- Shop window - Thank you, Gloucester. Last month you helped us dig ten new wells in Ethiopia.
- The person carrying this bag has helped fund heart research.
- This (service) has been made possible by voluntary donations.
- Your £10 does X.
- Today you have helped xxx.
- Your legacy saves xxx.
- Every month your direct debit xxx.
- This month, next month you will ...xxx.
- Every donated item helps xxx.
- Thanks to you we have helped get x people back to work/x neglected animals re-homed/xxx people fed.

## Part 3: Six ways to get your message across

### Approach 1: The pledge approach

We all like pledges. They let us know where we stand with both individuals and organisations. They convey confidence to the recipient irrespective of whether the pledge is ever likely to be tested. In the commercial world pledges are commonplace. The long-lasting and best recognised in the UK is probably John Lewis' 'never knowingly undersold'. FedEx in the United States grew large on promising to deliver 'absolutely, positively overnight'. Many companies promise the slightly more vague 'satisfaction guaranteed or your money back'.

A variant of the pledge approach is a commitment to repair and service items for a long, fixed period. Japanese cars and some other household items come with two or three year guarantees.

The purpose of the pledge approach to the seller is not to commit themselves to huge and ongoing levels of repairs, but to demonstrate to the purchaser their confidence in the product. This demonstration of confidence is designed to increase levels of sales.

The three rules of pledges are:

- Conveys confidence in the product to the consumer
- Is low-cost to deliver and high benefit to receive
- And is relevant and credible

This last point is important. Guarantees can be too long or unbelievable. There are soap dishes with a 25 year guarantee. How likely is it that anybody would go back 22 years after buying a soap dish to complain?

So how does this notion transmit to the not for profit sector? Quite well is the simple answer – though in practice it is rarely used by charities. It is probably seen as a little vulgar, which is a shame since it has so much potential.

#### How might it look?

- We promise we will only send you mailings you want to receive
- Every letter of complaint is read by a director and we promise to respond within 14 days.
- We promise people who use our services that they will notice a difference within 6 months.

In practice there are lots of ways that charities can make pledges but they rarely do.

## Approach 2: Tangible successes and numbers

How does a stakeholder know that a charity does a good job? There are dozens of ways to try and answer this question but a fairly straightforward way to is to be explicit about how many, how much, or what has changed about what a charity does. Put simply:

- How many people did you help?
- How much support did you give to beneficiaries?
- How much money have you saved in the last year?
- What big things have you achieved in the last year?

Charities tend to have a British reticence about shouting their achievements from the rooftops. This often hides an inability to shout about their achievements because they have not measured them or collated them.

So approach 2 to communicating impact requires a bit of un-British bravery and a calculator.

### How might it look?

- We have provided over 500,000 people in Bangladesh with clean water
- Each year we take over 1 million calls from people needing our help
- Last year we cut our IT costs by £800,000 by working closely with another charity
- Last year we reduced our admin costs by 12% by using the latest mobile technology
- We successfully lobbied the Government to introduce a free screening test for every newborn child

The evaluation storm troopers will frown on the simplicity of this kind of measurement system. Outputs and outcomes are being muddled they will argue. How do we know that people who got clean water had their lives changed, or that taking a telephone call is not the same as changing a life? They are probably right. But as Schopenhauer might argue 'the pursuit of perfection is the enemy of the pursuit of doing things better'. Every charity has to start somewhere with measuring and communicating impact. For too long, charities have not done things because they were too hard or a perfect solution was elusive. Every charity needs to start somewhere.

## Approach 3: Testimonial and endorsements

The commercial advertising industry has known for some time that getting real people to provide their endorsements to a product acts as a reassurance to prospective and existing customers. The message is simple – I used this product and liked it, so could you. We all relate to real people and can identify with their situation in many cases. So when we see pictures of somebody who has lost 4 stone on a new diet, or a person who found love on the internet, or a car owner who saved on their car insurance we are meant to feel "that could be me."

In the charity world the concept is the same but the application is slightly different. Few stakeholders are likely to think 'that could be me' with any relish when faced

with images of a charity beneficiary. Indeed quite the opposite. But the notion of presenting real people has the same power. People speak to people. That's why child sponsors get letters from their sponsored child.

A twist on the endorsement approach is the celebrity endorsement approach. The power of this approach is that if a trusted, respected, public figure provides a testimonial about the power or impact of a charity's work it adds a punch to the message that ordinary endorsements may not be able to.

How might it look?

- *When clean water came to my village, I had the time to teach my children to read – and none of us get sick so often. Thank you XXXX*
- *When I called to ask about how to reduce my council tax, the person on the phone was so helpful and the booklet was brilliant. Thank you XXXX*
- *XXXX are one of the most cost-conscious charities I have ever worked with. Bill Gates, Microsoft*
- *I lost my job when the new technology was introduced. It's saved the XXXX £300k a year and I'm retraining to be a dentist*
- *My child was diagnosed with a profound hearing loss at 3 weeks old. This meant that we never missed a step in helping her to get the best support. Thank you*

(All these quotes are fictitious – sadly)

There are few charities that cannot provide testimonials of some sort. The key ingredients are making sure that stakeholders see them as genuine and that they come from people whose views mean something. It is great for a Chief Executive to say 'this charity is fantastic' but what else are they going to say? The same applies to a beneficiary – of course they are going to say good things about the service, so the emphasis needs to be on the difference to the quality of life it has engendered.

#### **Approach 4a: Quartiles and percentiles**

The commercial sector uses comparative results as a central weapon to demonstrate impact and effectiveness. 'Our prices are 10% lower measured against a basket of other supermarkets', 'Our ISA is in the top 3 for average annual growth' and so on. Much of this comparative approach would not be acceptable in charities.

So the question is whether there are elements of it that can be used. The approach that is most likely to be acceptable is a comparison with the sector as a whole (see the 'How might it look?' box below). A further problem with this comparative approach is that what is impressive for donors, may be distinctly unimpressive to prospective staff members – see the example below about staff salaries.

How might it look?

- *We're in the top 25% of charities with happy staff*
- *We aim to keep our admin costs below 10% but above 5% to make sure our charity is lean but efficient*

So do not hold your breath about this approach, though one day a charity or two will work out a way to use comparative data effectively, without offence, and they will steal a march on their competitors.

### **Approach 4b: Survey results**

If using comparative data is difficult, then using survey results should be straightforward – providing the information is available. The advantage of survey data is that it can be used to reassure stakeholders who otherwise might be uncomfortable. For example, suppose a supporter is unhappy about how many mailings they receive, then the knowledge that 90% of donors are happy is likely to leave them feeling that they are exceptional in their discomfort, rather than the norm.

Similarly how can one organisation prove that it does a good job with its clients or beneficiaries? It may be that the cost per beneficiary is high or hard to establish, so providing information that 90% (or whatever the figure is) of clients are satisfied or very satisfied will help provide donors with comfort and reassurance.

How might it look?

- In our surveys of donors 90% said they were happy with the level of mailings they received
- In our survey of staff 90% said they felt the organisation was effective or very effective at keeping costs down
- In our survey of volunteers 90% said they felt the organisation was good or very good at making the most of their skills
- In our survey of clients 90% said they felt our counselling services has made a big or a huge difference to their lives

Most professional charities will already be carrying out regular surveys of key stakeholders as part of their own internal impact and effectiveness suggestions.<sup>1</sup>

### **Approach 5: Confide in your stakeholders**

None of this is easy. Nobody said it would be. So tell your stakeholders that. Society has a terrible tendency to force perfection and infallibility on those in public life. Politicians can never admit that something is difficult to achieve or to implement. Companies can never acknowledge it is hard work coming up with even better services and lower prices.

Charities do not have to get caught in this trap. They can admit that something is difficult – indeed they can turn their weaknesses into a source of intimacy and strength in relationships with stakeholders. The box below gives an example of how this might work.

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<sup>1</sup> And if they are not, nfpSynergy is happy to help!

**How might it look?**

Our biggest difficulty is working out how to make sure our work is effective. We don't pretend this is easy. It's not. So we work in dozens of different ways to improve our effectiveness – by asking our clients, by surveying our staff and volunteers and by asking you our donors what you think. So if you have ideas about how we could do this better please let us know. Last year we received 250 letters of complaint and another 201 suggestions from staff and clients about how we could do a better job. Our CEO reads every one of them, we reply to every one and we acted on approximately half.

This confiding approach can work in a number of ways: about complaints, about proving effectiveness, about keeping costs low and even with staff and their concerns. This is because inherent in this approach is not just an acknowledgement that you do not have all the answers, but also a commitment to act on the ideas and responses generated by stakeholders.

**Approach 6: Turn your core advantages or your impact into your brand - wordbites and soundbites**

The next stage on from creating a range of statements which communicate the breadth of work that a charity does is turn 'pub facts' (to use the Skoda terms) into 'brand messages'. The difference between this approach and the previous ones is not necessarily the way that messages are communicated but the frequency and power with which they are used.

From all the plethora of words and messages that a charity puts out these may be boiled down into two or three key statements which are the most important messages that a charity is trying to get across.

This is not the place to get into detailed discussion about branding (see nfpSynergy's *Polishing the Diamond* and *the Jeweller's Story* for more information on this topic). In essence we are arguing that it makes strategic sense to turn the most powerful of a charity's statements into a longer-term statement of their competitive advantage. From the commercial sector perhaps the best-known of these is John Lewis' 'never knowingly undersold' which promises value to the customer and displays their confidence in keeping their prices low.

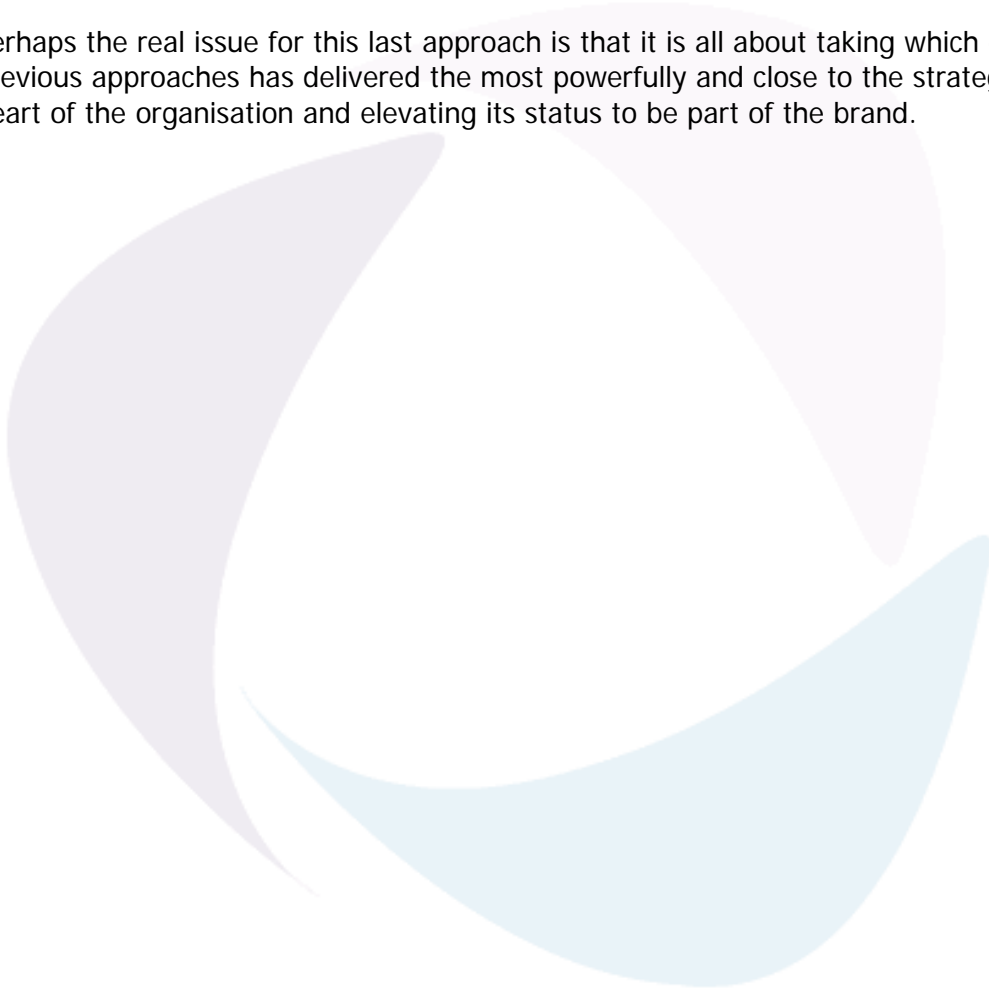
For charities, these statements might be about:

- Where the money comes from (e.g. individuals).
- Where the money does not come from (e.g. government or companies).
- How the work is done (e.g. using local staff).
- How the work is not done (e.g. no destruction of healthy animals)
- The difference from previous years (e.g. more people helped for less cost).

**How might it look?**

- We receive no State Aid
- We never put down a healthy animal
- Every 6 seconds we bring somebody fresh, clean drinking water
- It costs us £8 to answer a call - £1 less than last year
- Its costs us 8p for somebody to use our website – the most cost-effective way to get information to those who need it
- Our campaign to get free screening tests cost £60,000 – that's just 11p for every family tested each year. We make your donation work harder. 5000 volunteers, our trustees, our patrons and our president think our charity is so good they work for free

Perhaps the real issue for this last approach is that it is all about taking which of the previous approaches has delivered the most powerfully and close to the strategic heart of the organisation and elevating its status to be part of the brand.



## Getting the message across: creating a drizzle of messages across all communications

So you have agreed what messages you want to get across, and which of the 6 approaches work best for you. Many charities have what we call an 'annual report tendency': huge amount of effort into a wealth of material for something that is rarely seen or read (as Churchill might have said of the charity annual report - never has so much energy been invested by so many to be read by so few).

The opposite strategy is needed: a small amount of message but a continuous exposure. We will call this the 'drizzle' strategy: continuous low levels of communications exposure. Here are just some of the ways that these messages about comfort and inspiration can be got across:

- On the back of every letterhead
- On the bottom of every email
- On both sides of every donation form
- With every payslip
- On every business card
- On every invoice
- On every page of the website and especially the home page
- On the outer and return envelope of every mailing
- Inserted into every box of Christmas cards
- By training every staff member and volunteer to use the messages in conversation
- On every piece of corporate stationery including invoices and cheques
- Slipped into every radio & TV interview
- Woven into every press release

And many other opportunities that we have not even thought of. The real secret is volume and frequency, not depth. Messages need to be absorbed in 10 seconds not 10 minutes.

Joe Saxton and Chris Greenwood.  
September 2006

### **Impossible without.....**

Alan Gosschalk, Brian Garvey, the staff at nfpSynergy and all the charities whose experiences have contributed to our insights about charities.

### **About nfpSynergy**

nfpSynergy is the UK's only think-tank and research consultancy dedicated to the not for profit sector. It provides ideas, insights and information to help voluntary and community organisations thrive in an ever-changing world. Regularly researching the views of public and parliament, media and not for profit organisations themselves - nfpSynergy can carry out a range of stakeholder research projects for not for profit organisations. You can contact us on [info@nfpsynergy.net](mailto:info@nfpsynergy.net) or call and ask to talk to Chris, Brian or Joe on 020 7415 7155. Alternatively go to our website ([www.nfpSynergy.net](http://www.nfpSynergy.net)) to download over 20 free reports

### **About the ImpACT Coalition**

The ImpACT (Improving Accountability, Clarity and Transparency) coalition was launched in the summer of 2005 by a group of leading fundraising charities (supported by several infrastructure bodies) who want to work together to improve public trust and confidence in the charitable sector and the way it works. Working individually and together, they are committed to enhancing the public's understanding of the sector through evidence and openness.

The coalition has grown rapidly to include over 70 leading charities and trade bodies, including most of the top 50 fundraising charities in the UK.

For more information, please contact the Coalition's Director, Richard Marsh, on 020 7840 1038 or via [richardm@institute-of-fundraising.org.uk](mailto:richardm@institute-of-fundraising.org.uk).

[www.institute-of-fundraising.org.uk/ImpACT](http://www.institute-of-fundraising.org.uk/ImpACT)