

Credible copywriting and personal testimonials in charity marketing

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Many charities can't afford to engage agencies to create a whizz-bang campaign for them. And in many instances, a whizz-bang approach isn't appropriate, either; a personal story or a campaign that strikes an emotional chord will often elicit a better response from potential and existing donors. It also reassures them that their money is going direct to the cause and not on a free pen or key ring. That's why a lot of fundraising direct mail is focusing on well-targeted letters which make use of personal testimonials.

Caring for your case study

You've found someone who's happy to work with you. What now? Geraldine Oliver, previously of Deafness Research UK, advises: 'Once you've found your case study, don't neglect them. You've had to invest time recruiting them. Now, you have to maintain them, keep them on-side and meet their wishes.

'Also, make sure your case study's expectations match your own. While someone may have agreed to work with you, they may be surprised to hear that one of the national newspapers, for instance, will want to send a photographer and to use their real name. Your case study has to be prepared for that.'

TIP Case studies need to be actively recruited and they don't have a long shelf life, so strike while the iron is hot. Otherwise, you may find that they will forget things/feel differently/lose the impetus to participate. Like fresh food, case studies have a sell-by date!

How do you create a compelling letter?

First, you must consider your audience. John Blake, supporter relations manager at the Stroke Association, says: 'Today's donors expect you to state what you need the money for, precisely what you're going to do with it and to then feed back on your successes and the impact their donations have had. The old-style disclaimer, 'We will use the funds where the need is greatest', should be avoided wherever possible, enabling you to deliver a much



stronger 'ask'. It's also imperative that you build a bond with your donors, acknowledge their previous donations in communications and personalise as much as possible.'

The copy should also reflect the situation. 'If you're dealing with a disaster fund, your letter will be very immediate,' says Blake. 'Your message is that you need money to provide food and shelter, and you need it now. A more general campaign will explain the need and the solution and then ask for money to achieve that solution. Also, consider who the letter is from – a chief executive might be appropriate for broader aims, while a fieldworker could report on the work at the coalface and give the letter authenticity.'

TIP Ash Gilbert, director of Pebblebeach Fundraising, says: 'How about asking one of your front-line staff to write the main letter? It will need some polishing from you, but it will be more real and sincere than if you try to write it for them.'

Tone of voice

'The tone of voice should reflect the nature of the communication: urgency if appropriate, sincerity, and, just as important, honesty and openness,' says Blake. 'You must explain the issue or problem faced by the beneficiaries of your organisation. Today, charities need to be specific with appeals and should aim to guarantee that donations will directly support the work discussed in the appeal, as often as possible. It's widely believed that this will become more and more important in the next few years.'

'In terms of detail, the letter or leaflet needs to convey a situation without putting the reader off continuing. That level of detail and, for example, the degree of shock value will largely be dictated by the nature of the organisation and also by what people have successfully responded to in the past.'

TIP Francesca Boardman, head of copy at Whitewater, suggests: 'Great advice for writing a natural, engaging letter is to pretend you're having a cup of coffee with a friend and sharing your story. Simply say it aloud, then write it as you would say it. After all, engaging donors with great fundraising copy is not about winning the Booker prize. It's about speaking to them in their own language.'



'Also, read copy aloud, then think about how it makes you feel. Do you feel compelled to act? Were you engaged with the story? Did it lose you at any point? Is it believable? Is it right for the target audience? You'll know by your answers if you've got it right.'

Photography

Simon Lane, head of art direction at Whitewater, says: 'All too often, what should be powerful and expressive photography illustrating the plight of a subject, ends up too far down the list of essentials. It can also be hard to get decent images from clients' image libraries which either haven't been overused or don't build a good enough picture of the lives of the people within those photos.'

'Increasingly, we aren't allowed to show a powerful image – say, for instance, a beautiful picture of a child which ticks all the boxes: plenty of eye contact, a sense of time, place and situation contained in the environment around that child, and representative of the headline alongside it – because the image is not the person featured in a case study.'

TIP Use a professional photographer. There are many award-winning portrait photographers out there, often desperate for work. Set out some areas of work and projects that you know you'd like to base appeals on in the near future. Brief the photographer and get them to brainstorm ideas with the art director. The results will not only have you chomping at the creative bit in anticipation of working with such brilliant material, they'll also give the photographer more potentially award-winning images to exhibit.

'Also, don't underestimate the power of an envelope image. Get it right and donors, their friends and even the postman will be surprised. I know this works: I've done it twice!'

How do you make your campaign stand out from those of other charities?

'Donors give because they make an emotional connection with your cause,' says Gilbert. 'The charities that are doing well are the ones that are making that connection, bringing the donor in to the work, showing them the cause, the need and the solution that a donation delivers. They are the ones that offer closeness and access to the work. Be direct, be clear, be honest about your work and your need. Use real case studies to show how the donor's support will make a difference.'



TIP Decide on envelope size (bearing in mind the cost implications) and a plain outer envelope versus a strapline/messaging, intrigue versus personalisation. 'There are many options that are all tried and tested,' says Blake, 'but until you try it and test it, it's difficult to say which will work best for your particular mailing or campaign. Take some good advice as a starting point and then test, test and test again.'

Is there a way to address compassion fatigue?

Gilbert says: 'I don't see the current reduction in giving as compassion fatigue; just a logical reaction to a reduction in people's budgets. Compassion is still there. People still want to feel that they are making a valuable contribution, so give them those opportunities. Ask donors for less than they've given before, but add an 'ask' for a non-financial contribution: a message of support, or answering a survey that helps define your corporate strategy.'

'Also, try this. Send your donors a direct mail pack that explicitly does not ask for money! Remind them of the projects they've supported in the past; tell them how grateful you are; show them the benefit they've delivered to your clients. You'll strengthen the relationship with your donors who will give again when times are better, and the increase in response you'll see to the next appeal will probably cover the costs of the thank you mailing anyway.'

TIP Try something that requires little effort on the part of the donor. Ed Prichard, creative director at Atom Consulting, helped create a library for Centrepoin, the UK charity that provides emergency accommodation for young people. Prichard saw social media as a way of getting the books, so his team created a website, www.ahomebuiltinbooks.org, and sent emails and blogs asking people to donate 'the book that changed their life'. Bookshops, publishers, authors and journalists were sent letters, while others joined the Facebook group. The total campaign cost under £200 and led to a library of books worth £35,000!

What are the potential pitfalls?

When the Voluntary Action Media Unit conducted research with both the media and charities, case studies were one of the most contentious issues. Charities complained of journalists who wasted their time asking for interviewees who were then not used, and of vulnerable individuals traumatised by insensitive questioning or misrepresentation of their stories.



'The best case studies are the most emotional and the most direct, but these naturally place more of a burden on the subjects,' says Gilbert. 'So it's imperative to work with your subjects to agree a way of telling their story with which they are comfortable. Talk through the possible implications for them; press attention especially. Allow the subjects to see what you've written and encourage them to make changes if they want to. Finally, accept the fact that sometimes people change their minds and that you may have to pull a campaign.'

TIP Give the interviewer as much detailed information as possible about the subject in advance and make sure the person you have put forward is the right person, with the right story. You don't want to be left with an interview where your key media message is lost.

What the law says

Legal clearance is essential, so check you aren't inadvertently breaking any laws. For information and advice, see [The Data Protection Act 1998](#), and its [Good Practice Note for Charities and Marketing](#); the Institute of Fundraising also has [Codes of Fundraising Practice](#).

Gift Aid

Gift Aid can boost the value of donations by allowing a charity to claim back the tax paid by the donor (at the basic rate). That means that, for every pound donated, a charity can claim an extra 28.2p from the Inland Revenue. Even if a charity hasn't been claiming, they can backdate a Gift Aid claim for six years, to which HMRC will add any interest due. The charity simply needs an accurate record of the donation. As an example of how much Gift Aid is worth, £900 million was given back by HMRC in 2007/08, while £700 million was left unclaimed!

Panikos Efthimiou, charities training manager at the Charities Aid Foundation (www.cafonline.org), says: 'The wonderful thing about Gift Aid is that you don't need a signature. There are many ways to Gift Aid and ticking the box is just one option. The key is, at the point of asking, to highlight how simple the process is. People see the word 'tax' and imagine that it will be complicated. Explain that it's as simple as saying 'Yes' and that it involves no additional cost to them.'

'Also, if a donor has made a gift but hasn't checked the Gift Aid box, the charity can call and ask if they'd like to Gift Aid the donation. As long as the phone call is recorded or a confirmation email is sent to the donor, the Gift Aid donation can be made retrospectively.'

