

**Disgusted or delighted:
What does concern the public about charities?**

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Summary

A representative¹ sample of the UK population was asked to think about ‘charities and the work that they do’ and pick up to five issues from a prompted list that they found ‘off-putting, worrying or irritating’. The biggest single response was ‘concerns about the amount that goes to the charity’ (68% - see figure 1) and only 5% of respondents said nothing irritated or concerned them. Of greatest topical interest is that ‘fundraising on the street’ was only nominated by 12% of people and was 12th out of the 15 options.

The background

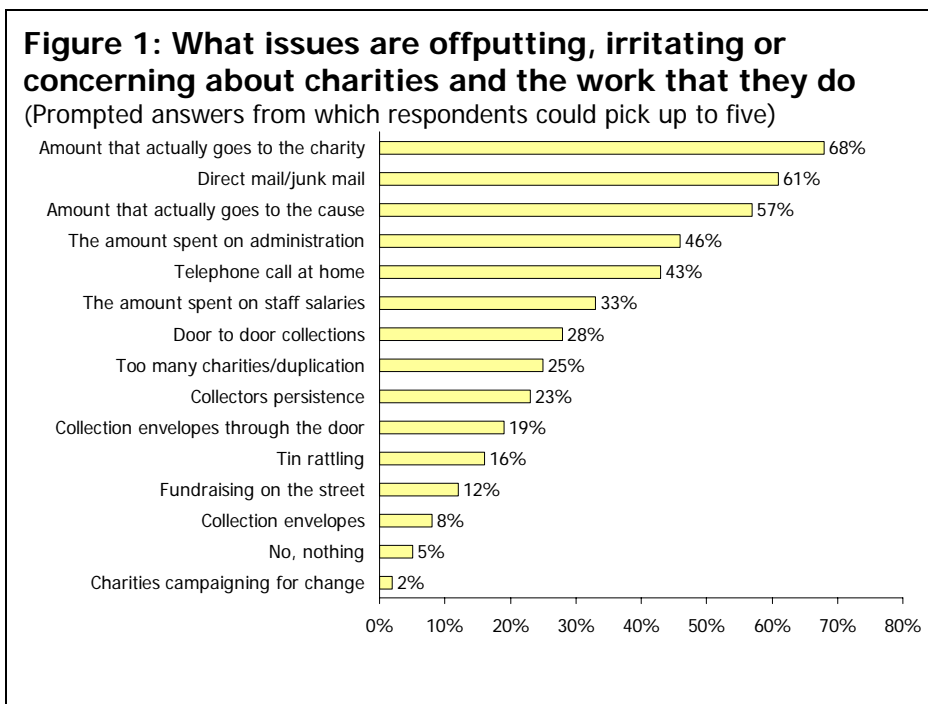
There has been much speculation about the issues that trouble or concern the public about charities and their work. The ‘trust and confidence’ issue has been used to highlight issues of concern in a range of areas such as charity law, face-to-face or street fundraising (also derogatorily called ‘chugging’), regulation of fundraising, the payment of trustees, and chief executives’ salaries. In order to try and understand the public’s concerns on these issues, nfpSynergy has been carrying out research over the last two years. This shows that basic levels of trust are high (over 55% of the public trust charities more than either government or companies) and when asked over the telephone half of respondents said nothing troubled them about charities. However the panel survey (i.e. postal survey) indicates that the base level of concern is higher than this, with only 5% of respondents ticking the box ‘no nothing’ or not answering the question. The prompted list of topics used in figure 1 is synthesized from our research results into confidence over the last couple of years.

The results

Two issues dominate the list of items in figure 1: the way that money is spent and specific fundraising activities. This former set of concerns appears to focus around whether enough of a donation goes to ‘the charity’ or ‘the cause’ or is spent on salaries or administration. Given that 68% of respondents nominated ‘the amount that actually goes to the charity’ and 57% nominated ‘the amount that actually goes to the cause’ some people are even voting for both (closely overlapping) concerns. Below this on the list of ‘spending’ concerns are ‘the amount spent on administration’ (46%) and ‘the amount spent on salaries’ (33%). Indeed all the ‘spending’ concerns that we put on the prompted list had a high level response. Put simply the public has a high level of concern about whether charities spend money well.

Whether this is a niggling concern or a fundamental one is not clear from this research. However when we have asked a similar kind of question over the telephone half the public say nothing irritates them about charities. This suggests that while the public is concerned about aspects of charities and the way that they work, they are not top of mind concerns – because they aren’t mentioned in the format of a telephone interview where no prompted responses were given.

¹ Carried out through the NFO group’s research panel (now part of TNS) in November 2003 with 984 respondents representative of the UK population



Alongside the concerns about ‘spending’ are concerns about specific fundraising techniques. The interesting aspect of these results is not that fundraising is a source of irritation or concern (after all it is most people’s prime contact with charities), but which techniques dominate the results.

Direct mail/junk mail comes very high up the list (61% of respondents), followed by telephone calls at home (43%), and door-to-door collections (28%). Fundraising on the street was only nominated by 12% of respondents (we could have called it chugging but that would have biased the results). Yet given the relative angst in sector minds and media about street fundraising it would be easy to have guessed that it would have been the other way round - but fundraising on the street does not appear to be a source of concern for that many people. However, it may be a very deep source of aggravation for that 12% - but that is only speculation.

Two other points about the source of concerns or irritations are worth noting. ‘Too many charities/duplication’ was nominated by only 25% of respondents. Again this is an area that creates much angst and many column inches, but doesn’t appear to be that high up the public’s list of worries. The second point is that ‘campaigning for change’ barely features on the public’s list of worries with only 2% of respondents selecting it.

All age groups, both sexes, givers and non-givers are concerned by ‘the amount that goes to the charity’ with little variation between groups, and this is also true for ‘amount on the cause’. Administration and salaries are a bigger source of concern as people get older (35% of 18-24s were concerned about administration, but 59% of the over 65s were).

The concern about fundraising techniques appears to be a function of experience. So ‘givers’ were more likely to be concerned by direct mail than ‘non-givers’ (63% vs. 53%) and older people more concerned than younger people: over 60% of the over 45s were concerned or irritated by direct mail but only 32% of the 18-24s.

In contrast, more young people (25% of 18-24s) were irritated by ‘fundraising on the street’ than any other group (average of 12%). But young people are the primary target of street fundraising so perhaps this isn’t so surprising.

What does it all mean for charities?

This research has a number of implications for charities and how they communicate with the world both collectively and individually.

- 1) Despite recent media coverage about street fundraising, people’s concerns or irritations are far broader than a single fundraising technique. So any concerted campaign to change people’s attitudes to and understanding of charities needs to address a very broad range of issues, rather than a single fundraising technique.
- 2) Every charity needs to go back to basics in terms of the messages they put across to their supporters and stakeholders. Every communication needs to make clear how much money goes to the cause and how much goes on fundraising and management (administration is a terrible phrase to use – it has no positive connotations). Charities need to be able to show how they spend donors’ money effectively and explain why their salaries are justified (see also our research report called ‘Paid or unpaid: that is the question’).
- 3) Every charity needs to look at how it puts its own supporters in the driving seat in terms of what direct mail they receive. The vast majority of charities still send donors what they think a donor should get, with donors given little opportunity to pick what they receive. Given this we shouldn’t be surprised that the public find charity direct mail so off-putting or irritating.
- 4) The sector as a whole needs to work out how to respond to this broad base of concerns. It is very difficult for any individual charity to ‘come clean’ and explain how modern fundraising has to invest to grow its fundraising income in the future. Yet until people understand how modern charities work, and buy into the modus operandi, it is difficult to see how their concerns will be diminished. The solution must be some kind of sector-wide response to increase people’s understanding of how modern charities work, and reassure people that charities are effective at spending donor’s money. This, in combination with individual charity’s communications, will begin to increase the levels of understanding and reduce the levels of concern about charities and how they work.

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We would welcome suggestions for additions or changes to the list of prompts in figure 1 for future research.

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