

Mission Impossible?

A report on a reference collection of vision statements from over eighty charities

**Compiled by nfpSynergy
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Part 1: How we compiled this document

In compiling this document we used an entirely web-based approach. Each organisation's website was located and the following actions were taken:

1. Looked on the home page and the 'about us' / 'what we do' sections
2. Searched for the words 'vision', 'purpose', 'mission', 'values' and belief in the organisation's website search box
3. Perused the organisation's annual report if it was published online

Where charities had clearly labelled their vision, mission, values etc., compiling this document was a relatively straightforward task. However, there were many cases where essence elements had to be inferred from the 'about us' or 'what we do' section of an organisation's website.

A further methodological problem was that the way in which charities presented their essence often did not fit neatly into the six chosen categories. In these cases, the definitions presented in the next section were used as guidelines for determining which bits of essence should go where.

As a result, pieces of an organisation's mission or vision were often separated out to fit more easily into the prescribed categories. It is important to note that this was done for the purposes of clarity and comparability only – we are not suggesting that charities should get hung up on the semantics of which part of their strategic essence should be labelled what. It is not a problem if an organisation's vision and purpose is incorporated into their mission statement or if they don't have a section clearly labelled 'beliefs'. What is important is that anyone who reads the information that is available is provided with a clear and inspiring picture of what the charity stands for and how it goes about acting on this.

Analysing the vision statements of 80 organisations

We began putting this document together over a year ago for use with our own clients. When preparing it to be published for a wider audience, we thought it best to ensure the information we had collected previously was still up-to-date and began scanning charity websites for visions again. We were delighted to discover that even in the short space of one year, a large proportion of the organisations included in this document had revised various elements of their strategic essence in order to make them more compelling (or perhaps they just got round to updating their websites!)

For example, the Multiple Sclerosis Society had changed their vision from "*A world without multiple sclerosis*" to the more emotive "*A world free from the devastating effects of Multiple Sclerosis.*" Similarly, RNLI moved from a cumbersome strapline, "*Safety on the Sea – 175 Years of Saving Lives at Sea*" to the much punchier and effective, "*Saves lives at sea*".

There was also a trend towards displaying visions, missions and values in a manner that was more immediately accessible – as a result, we were able to fill in many of the gaps that were left when we began the project in late 2004. Having said this, over a quarter of charities failed to showcase their strapline on their website and in 18 out of the 81 charities included, it was not possible to infer any clear vision or values from the website. If we've got it wrong we apologise – please email us at reports@nfpsynergy.net and let us know the correct version.

Introduction: How strong is your essence?

An organisation's essence is made up of a six elements which, when used effectively, showcase the dreams, character and direction that distinguishes the charity from all others. These are:

- vision
- purpose
- mission
- values
- beliefs
- strapline

An organisation with a strong essence is one where staff and supporters are aware of these various elements, using them as yardsticks against which to make strategic decisions. It is a place where each staff member and supporter understands how their contribution is feeding into the organisation's greater goals. It is also a place where staff and supporters feel a keen sense of pride about being affiliated with an organisation that distinctly stands for something bigger than any individual or issue.

Clearly, it is important for a charity to have a strong vision statement (we use this last phrase as shorthand for the statement that encapsulates the vision, mission and other elements of an organisation's essence) and many UK charities have powerful vision statements at their heart.

So we thought it would be useful to compile the visions, purposes, missions, values, beliefs and straplines of over 80 of the UK's larger charities as a reference work. We don't claim that these 80 organisations are better or worse than the sector as a whole – they are picked to be a cross-section of better known charities. The purpose of this document is not to highlight where organisations are getting their essence or vision statements wrong. Rather it is to flag up good practice and to provide charities with a benchmark against which they can evaluate the way in which they currently present their vision, mission, values etc. We did not contact charities directly to ask for information but used their websites (see below). This means we have an outsider's perspective, as we have the same access as any member of the public with an Internet connection.

Defining the elements of a strategic essence

Below we have defined the six¹ main elements that we felt were critical to an organisation's strategic essence – vision, purpose, mission, values, beliefs and strapline.

Vision

The main purpose of an organisational vision is to provide a super-ordinate goal towards which everyone who shares a similar dream can strive. It provides an inspirational picture of what the world could be like with some cooperative effort and (in an ideal world) unites employees, supporters, beneficiaries and similarly oriented organisations in an effort to bring the vision to life.

¹ For information on compiling an essence statement see our publication Jeweller's story available free from www.nfpsynergy.net

An organisation's vision is its guiding star – it defines what the organisation believes in and the kind of world it wants to see created. Importantly, a vision conveys a larger sense of purpose so that employees and supporters see themselves as building a magnificent monument, rather than just lugging heavy stones. A vision is not restricted by the organisation's role or capacity; in fact, it is usually much bigger than what any individual organisation can achieve in isolation. It is a compelling description of what ultimate success looks like and should be challenging but achievable. It should appeal to people's hearts and minds and inspire practical but creative and impassioned directions.

A good starting point when conceiving an organisational vision is to ask trustees and employees, "What sort of world you would create for our beneficiaries if you were handed a magic wand?"

Purpose

If the vision is the overarching dream, the purpose is the specific part of the dream that the organisation hopes to make real. A charity's purpose outlines why the organisation was established in the first place and identifies the piece of the puzzle that it is trying to fill. Regularly referring back to a clearly defined purpose helps an organisation to make strategically appropriate decisions and to remain focussed in its activities.

In determining organisational purpose, the following questions can be considered:

- What contribution do you want your charity to contribute to the organisation's vision?
- Which pieces of the puzzle are currently being done well?
- Which are being done badly or not at all?
- What piece of the puzzle is your organisation well-positioned to fill? (What are the strengths, skills and strategies that your organisation can harness in working towards the organisational vision?)
- If you could look back in 20 years time, what would you have liked to have seen the organisation achieve?

Mission

If the vision defines the end point, and the purpose defines the specific part of the vision that the organisation is striving to fulfil, the mission operationalises the way in which the charity plans to meet these overarching goals - it is the game plan, so to speak.

The mission outlines the mechanisms through which strategic goals will be achieved and sets the boundaries for the organisation's activities. In this way, it guides operations of the ground and focuses the charities resources.

It is important to remember that times change and new ideas and technologies are always coming to the fore. While an organisational vision may remain the same for years and even decades, the mission should be updated regularly to reflect new and improved mechanisms by which the organisation can achieve its purpose.

When revising a mission statement, the Council on Foundations (a philanthropy organisation based in the USA) suggests conducting the exercise in Box 1 with board members. In order to facilitate organisation-wide buy-in, it may be even more useful to conduct it with all staff members during a staff meeting or strategic planning day.

Strapline

The strapline is a short phrase or sentence which sums up the organisation – it highlights what makes the organisation special or unique and is a brief but powerful impression that the organisation wants its public to remember. Imagine a strapline as the part of the iceberg that can be seen above the water – but supported and underpinned by the rest of the vision statement that usually can't be seen.

A strapline is particularly important in terms of helping supporters, who know little about the organisation, make a first impression about whether this is a charity they are interested in aligning themselves with. The beauty of the strapline is that it can be changed to reflect an updated strategic vision without the confusion and difficulties of a name change. Consider the way in which Sainsbury's changed the rather mundane strapline, '*Good food costs less at Sainsbury's*', to the more emotionally powerful, if enigmatic, '*Making life taste better*', to the now thoroughly confusing '*Try something new today*', when most people want to buy the same stuff week after week.

Meanwhile Tesco's has stuck with the now idiomatic, '*Every little helps*', and are by far and away the dominant supermarket in the UK. We don't claim that the strapline is the reason for Tesco's success, more that their values and vision permeate every aspect of what the organisation does and are distilled into the strapline.

Values

Values reflect the organisation's core ideology – they are the principles, standards and qualities that characterise the way in which a charity conducts its work. Values should be used to determine the appropriateness of suggested visions, strategies and actions. They create the organisational culture and will often determine the extent to which employees and supporters feel affiliated with the charity.

Like mission and vision, an organisation's values are often formally defined on paper. But the real work involves putting them into practice. Senior managers need to target and support behaviours and activities that exemplify the organisation's values.

Beliefs

The organisational beliefs are a statement of what the organisation believes or accepts to be true. Often they will provide the context for the work the charity does. Like values, beliefs will often determine the extent to which employees and supporters align themselves with the charity.

It is often easy to confuse values and beliefs. For us values are more about how the organisation conducts its business, the way in which it wants to behave, and the attributes that it would like to be seen as having. So a value might be that the organisation should be professional and authoritative in all that it did.

Beliefs are more externally oriented than values which focus typically on how an organisation does its job. Beliefs are best seen as more about the cause or statements of how the world should or could be. So a belief might be that 'every child has the right to an education' or that 'young people should be encouraged to be active citizens'.

However the reality is that many charities have different definitions of values and beliefs. So in the next section we present them together so as to avoid the need to re-label organisation's work.

Box 1: Exercise for updating a vision statement

Divide trustees/staff into small groups of three to five people. Ask each person to read the current mission statement and then answer the following questions:

- Is the current mission statement short and clear? If not, what is the problem?
- Does it tell people what good the foundation is doing and for whom? If not, what is missing, or is too much included?
- Is it grounded in our values? If not, what is missing?
- Does the statement serve as an umbrella that covers all the things we do - our underlying strategies? If not, what is not included under the umbrella?
- Do our prescribed activities reflect contemporary and innovative ways of working towards our vision and purpose or are we being held back by history? Are there angles we haven't thought about?
- Does the statement encompass all the people to whom we target our services? If not, which clients or stakeholders are missing?
- Does the statement communicate who we are to the average person? If not, why not? For example, does it have too much jargon? Is it unclear or too abstract?
- Is this a statement we can get excited about and be proud of? If not, what must be done?

Once everyone in the group has finished, each person shares her or his answers with the group and then each group feeds back into the wider group.

Examples of organisations getting it right

Vision

A number of visions stood out in the way that they helped the reader to truly visualise the world of which the respective charitable organisation dreamed. Examples include:

“Our vision is a society in which all children are loved, valued and able to fulfil their potential. In other words, a society that will not tolerate child abuse - whether sexual, physical, emotional, or neglect.” (NSPCC)

Or presented in the form of a poem:

*“Our vision for every child,
Life in all its fullness;
Our prayer for every heart,
The will to make it so.”* (World Vision UK)

“Our vision is of a society that promotes and protects good mental health for all, and that treats people with experience of mental distress fairly, positively, and with respect.” (MIND)

At the other end of the scale, and without naming names, a number of organisations had visions that were more like purposes – they explained what the charity did but did not paint an inspiring picture of the type of world the charity was working towards.

It was also interesting to discover that a number of charities showcased ‘mini-visions’ for each aspect of their work, rather than having one overarching one. While it is certainly desirable to have an overarching vision which unites the various arms of an organisation’s work, the mini-vision approach was very effective in terms of impressing on prospective supporters that the charity has a clear and inspired strategic direction. To illustrate, Asthma UK’s five mini-visions (or aspirations as they refer to them) are presented in Box 2.

Box 2: Asthma UK – a multi-faceted approach to visioning

Aspiration: Children

Asthma UK wants all children and young people with asthma to achieve their full potential free from the impact of asthma – in pre-school, school and college. All carers of children with asthma should be confident that their children are in a safe, asthma-friendly place whenever they are studying or at play.

Aspiration: Healthcare

Asthma UK wants all people with asthma to have access to the best possible healthcare – including early and accurate diagnosis of their condition – to enable them to have control over their asthma today.

Aspiration: Employment

Asthma UK wants all adults with asthma to have the opportunity to perform to their full economic potential, in a work environment that is asthma-friendly, for an employer who is asthma-aware, and where employment is not denied through a misunderstanding of asthma and its impact on people’s working lives.

Aspiration: Life and leisure

Asthma UK wants every person with asthma to be able to make lifestyle choices free from the fear that asthma will hold them back – and to enjoy leisure activities free from the impact of asthma.

Aspiration: Future

Asthma UK wants to give people with asthma freedom from asthma in the future. We will continue to fund research to understand the causes of asthma, reduce its effect on people’s lives and prevent it developing in the first place.

Purpose

A concerning proportion of charities lacked a clear and concise statement of their purpose or main aim – in these cases, any potential supporters are left having to trawl through substantial amounts of information in order to understand the essence of what the organisation does. Having said this, a large number of charities did have effective purpose statements, though these were frequently found within vision, mission or ‘about us’ sections of the website rather than being showcased as stand alone statements on the home page. In other words, for better or worse, we present the information in part 2 in a way that may not be how they appear on their website. Indeed in some cases we give a charities degree of coherence in our presentation of their vision and values that may not exist in real life!

A selection of the many good examples of purpose statement are included below.

“The Blue Cross is a registered charity which aims to ensure the welfare of companion animals by providing practical care, highlighting the benefits of companionship between animals and people, and promoting responsibility towards animals in the community.”
(The Blue Cross)

“WaterAid is an international NGO dedicated exclusively to the provision of safe domestic water, sanitation and hygiene education to the world’s poorest people.” (WaterAid)

“MSF is an independent humanitarian medical aid agency committed to two objectives: providing medical aid wherever needed, regardless of race, religion, politics or sex; and raising awareness of the plight of people we help.” (Medecins Sans Frontieres)

“To provide information, practical assistance and emotional support for anyone affected by breast cancer.” (Breast Cancer Care)

“To encourage a better understanding of autism and to pioneer specialist services for people with autism and those who care for them.” (National Autistic Society)

“We exist to help all, especially young people of limited means, to travel and discover England and Wales by providing cheap, safe and secure Youth Hostels in superb coastal, countryside and city locations.” (YHA (England and Wales) Ltd)

“Action for Blind People is a national charity that provides practical support to blind and partially sighted people through work, housing, leisure and support.”
(Action for Blind People)

“Cats Protection rescues and rehomes unwanted and abandoned cats, and promotes responsible cat ownership.” (Cats Protection)

“Our purpose is to help the most vulnerable children and young people transform their lives and fulfil their potential.” (Barnardo’s)

The awards for the most concise and ‘to the point’ purpose statements go to RNLI and Marie Stopes International:

“To save lives at sea.” (RNLI)

“The prevention of unwanted births” (Marie Stopes International)

It was notable that VSO was one of the few organisations to include a brief statement of purpose; in addition to their strapline of *“Sharing Skills, Changing Lives”*; near their logo at the top of their home page, which went a long way towards helping an ‘outsider’ to immediately identify why the organisation exists. *“VSO is an international development charity that works through volunteers”*.

Mission

In many cases, charities’ missions had to be inferred from the ‘what we do section’. In 18 of the 81 charities surveyed, the mission could not even be inferred. Where a mission statement was clearly outlined, it sometimes came across as more of a ‘purpose’. That is, it explained what the charity was aiming for but didn’t describe how they planned to achieve this – it didn’t make the game plan clear.

While this is not much of a problem on a website, where potential supporters can simply check the ‘what we do’ section to clarify how the organisation carries out its mission, it does

weaken an organisation's strategic artillery – it is incredibly valuable for trustees and employees to have a clear statement about how the organisation plans to meet its goals which can be referred to regularly in determining steps forward.

A small selection of organisational missions which do their job well are highlighted below - given that a good mission statement outlines the organisations game plan, space precludes the inclusion of more than 5 examples of good practice.

“Our mission is to:

- *To carry out world-class research into the biology and causes of cancer;*
- *To develop effective treatments and improve the quality of life for cancer patients;*
- *To reduce the number of people getting cancer;*
- *To provide authoritative information on cancer.”*

(Cancer Research UK)

“The Blue Cross exists to:

- *treat the animals of owners who cannot afford private veterinary services;*
- *find permanent homes for unwanted or abandoned animals;*
- *educate the public in responsible animal ownership;*
- *promote the benefits to humans of companion animal ownership;*
- *ensure that all engaged with us, whether animals or people, receive courteous, friendly and high quality service.”*

“Action for Blind People enables blind and partially sighted people to transform their lives through:

- **Work:** *this includes services for visually impaired people to look for work, return to work, retain their job or set up their own business.*
- **Housing:** *Action for Blind People provides an innovative housing service called "Your Choice" that works with visually impaired people to enable them to live independently.*
- **Leisure:** *whether it's a holiday break or a passion for sports, Action for Blind People has a range of services for visually impaired people.*
- **Support:** *able to address all questions around sight loss, Action for Blind People provides a National Information and Advice Service that can also provide specialist advice on the Welfare Benefits available to visually impaired people.”*

“The Method of achieving the Aim of the Association is by providing an enjoyable and attractive scheme of progressive training, based on the Scout Promise and Law, and guided by adult leadership.”

(The Scout Association)

“We do this [achieve their purpose] by offering high quality services in seven integrated areas including:

- **Housing and Homelessness** - *the YMCA is the largest voluntary sector provider of safe, supported accommodation in England for single men and women between the ages of 16 and 35*
- **Sport, Health, Exercise and Fitness** - *the YMCA is the largest voluntary sector provider of health and fitness services that promote physical activity and healthy living*
- **Crime and Safety** - *the YMCA led groundbreaking work with young people in prisons and ex-offenders and continues to work vigorously to help reduce the risk of young people either turning to crime or becoming victims of crime*

- **Education and Skills** - the YMCA offer a variety of vocational, formal and informal school- and work-based learning opportunities for young people to develop skills and achieve recognition
- **Money and Work** - the YMCA offer a range of services designed to help increase the employability and financial awareness of young people, helping them to find and keep meaningful jobs”
- **Citizenship and Personal Development** - the YMCA empower young people by involving them in activities that stimulate, challenge and enable them to realise their potential and participate fully in their communities
- **Parenting and Family** - the YMCA offer a variety of services that help promote positive family relationships and is one of the largest providers of childcare and school-based initiatives

(YMCA)

Mission into strategy: Strategic goals and strategy documents

In addition to the six key strategic essential elements compiled in this document, a select few organisations also had clearly delineated strategic goals showcased on their websites. For example, Rethink has 12 strategic goals that allow supporters to see exactly what they are signing up for.

It was notable that in some cases, these goals are probably far more inspiring for volunteers and employees than for potential financial supporters. For example, Marie Curie’s “*We will inspire more people to give their time and money to Marie Curie Cancer Care*” and “*Marie Curie Cancer Care will be known as the pioneer of new ways to care for patients at the end of their lives*”.

Another way in which a limited number of charities were leading the way in terms of strategic essentials was in publishing a separate strategy document online. When this occurred, it provided the reader with a real sense that this was an organisation that had got its act together. It also provided a sense of transparency and strategic efficacy that made it very easy to trust that the charity was doing a good job and using supporters’ resources effectively.

Perhaps the best example was VSO’s “Focus for change”, which outlines their vision, purpose and strategy, their definition of disadvantage and development, their distinctive approach to development, their ‘change agenda’, how they plan to implement this in the various aspects of their work, and their development goals for each of the areas in which they work (education, HIV/AIDS, Disability, Health and social well-being, Secure livelihoods and Participation and governance). In describing the purpose of the strategy document, VSO’s Chief Executive writes on the website:

“Focus for Change should remain relevant for five years, but it does not have a fixed life span. It will be revised and built on as circumstances change and we all learn.

The plan is primarily for VSO staff and volunteers worldwide. It should enable you to understand VSO's vision of the future and to make decisions and take action on that basis. We hope it will also be useful for our partners, supporters, donors and other stakeholders.

Focus for Change is a guiding framework which will enable us to make more detailed plans so we can focus all VSO's efforts to achieve our purpose. Ultimately, I want everyone

connected with VSO to be able to see and feel a connection between their role and our joint effort to fight disadvantage and build a fairer world.”

Values and beliefs

The most effective value statements were those that appeared to truly capture the ideological orientation of the organisation. Values and beliefs tended to have little impact when they appeared only as a few catchy words or statements that were otherwise unrelated to the way in which the organisation conducted its business. For this reason, value statements consisting simply of a list of words (e.g. dedicated, passionate etc.) can seem arbitrary and unsubstantiated – the proof is in the doing.

A possible and intriguing exception to this rule was Shelter’s value statement, which contrasted the organisation’s ‘work’ values with their ‘people’ values to paint quite a clever picture of how the organisation operates: *“As an organisation we are intrusive, authoritative and positive. As people we strive to be inclusive, responsive, passionate and knowledgeable.”* It should be noted that while this is essentially just a list of words, each is consistent with the types of values that are implied throughout the rest of the website.

Values and beliefs are for everyone, all of the time – not just to look good in external communications. It is far important to have values which permeate all of an organisation’s promotional materials, activities and behaviour rather than simply hoping explicit values on a web or in a vision statement will do the trick. Saying does not make it so, doing does.

To illustrate, while no values were made explicit on Asthma UK’s website, it was evident from their very striking annual report that the organisation values innovation and accessibility – it was clear that they funded local, innovative initiatives and were creative in their utilisation of communication technologies in getting their resources to their beneficiaries.

Of course, for employees, an explicit statement of values can be a very important tool for ensuring that strategic decisions are made in line with the organisation’s overall ethos and essence. The characteristics of a value statement that tend to make it seem genuine and compelling are analysed below.

Values that run along a consistent theme or ethos appear more credible. This extract from NCH’s value statement is a good example:

“We value the family, in all its various forms, as a source of love and support for individuals and as the basis of a caring society. We believe all human beings are unique and have the potential for spiritual, moral and intellectual growth; and we should be ambitious for our children. We believe in partnerships between families and the services that support them.”
(NCH)

Similarly, values/beliefs that fit with the organisations founding principles tend to be highly convincing.

“From the outset, the founders of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, or IFAW, rejected the notion that the interests of humans and animals were separate. Instead they embraced the understanding that the fate and future of harp seals - and all other animals on Earth - are inextricably linked to our own.”
(IFAW)

“Greenpeace does not solicit or accept funding from governments, corporations or political parties. Greenpeace neither seeks nor accepts donations which could compromise its independence, aims, objectives or integrity. Greenpeace relies on the voluntary donations of individual supporters, and on grant-support from foundations.”
(Greenpeace)

“We believe that through adventure, we challenge individuals so that they learn and experience new things that can enrich their lives.”
(The Scout Association)

Values/beliefs which are put in context of how the organisation enacts are often particularly effective.

*“RNID believes in empowering deaf and hard of hearing people to take action themselves, and has developed a pack to help.
RNID believes that early detection of deafness or hearing loss is important, and continues to campaign for newborn hearing screening for all babies.
RNID believes that working in partnership with others can often achieve higher levels of service for deaf and hard of hearing people.*
(RNID)

“Sense believes strongly that each individual should be able to choose the help and support that is right for them. Our specialist services enable deafblind people to live as independently as possible, offering a range of housing, educational, employment and leisure opportunities that are built around each individual’s needs and wishes.”
(Sense)

“Leadership: We are leaders in the fight against MS. Through creativity and hard work, we accelerate the pace of scientific discovery, promote quality health care, stimulate community resources and services, advocate for favourable government policies and are the world’s best source of information about multiple sclerosis.”
(Multiple Sclerosis Society)

“Providing people with a roof over their heads is not a solution on its own. It has to run alongside solutions that help people to rebuild their lives. But in order to provide these solutions we need a proper understanding of the situation.”
(Crisis)

Values which act as a call to action make quite an impact:

*“Put life first
Struggle for justice
Speak out courageously
Test everything against experience
Work together with others”*
Christian Aid

And finally, values which extend to treatment of staff and employees seem particularly appealing...

“Valuing Staff & Volunteers: Rethink believes that the mental health workforce should be skilled, resourced and valued for the work they do and that they have the right to work in an environment that is warm, welcoming and safe.”

(Rethink)

Straplines

While there were some straplines that left a questionable impact, i.e., where the organisation described itself simply as a type of charity or as the largest of a type of charity, a large proportion did their job well in terms of leaving a clear, succinct and appealing impression of what the organisation does.

Straplines are the part of an organisation’s essence that are usually the most visible and have the greatest chance of being remembered for that reason. So the more memorable, inspiring and succinct they can be made the better. Examples of hard hitting straplines include:

- *‘Devoted to life’* (Marie Curie Cancer Care)
- *‘Care that liberates lives’* (Sue Ryder Care)
- *‘Caring and campaigning for our ex-service community’* (Royal British Legion)
- *‘Working to protect human rights worldwide’* (Amnesty International)
- *‘For all the world’s children – Health, education, equality, protection’* (Unicef-UK)
- *‘Providing choice in reproductive health worldwide’* (Marie Stopes International)
- *‘Saves lives at Sea’* (RNLI)
- *‘For ever, For everyone’* (National Trust)
- *‘Committed to curing arthritis’* (Arthritis Research Campaign)
- *‘Mind for better mental health’* (Mind)
- *‘Support for people with severe mental illness’* (Rethink)
- *‘For a living Planet’* (WWF)
- *‘Working to defeat ageism’* (Help the Aged)
- *‘Fighting for hope for homeless people’* (Crisis)

However, if pressed to pick the two most inspiring straplines, we would be inclined to go with Voluntary Services Overseas’ *‘Sharing skills, changing lives’* and World Vision’s *‘Poverty, together we can end it’*. Both of these suggest to the prospective supporter that by joining this charity, they would be part of a larger network of people and that they would really be making a difference.

Popular words

Ever wondered what the ‘hot’ words were in charity vision statements? We did a search to see which words came up most frequently in charities statements about their vision, mission values etc. – the results are presented in Table 1.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the word ‘support’ came up top of the list with 126 hits. ‘Respect’ and ‘partnership/collaboration’ came in next with 50 and 48 hits respectively. Other words making it into the top ten included ‘local’, ‘equal/inequalities’, ‘Christian’, ‘trust’, ‘effective’, ‘potential’ and ‘future’. Among the least used words were, ‘cost-effective’, ‘harmony’, ‘neutrality’, ‘friendly’ and ‘open-minded’.

Table 1: Most commonly used words in charity vision statements

Support	126	Honesty	9
Respect	50	Integrity	9
Partner/ Partnership/Collaboration	48	Responsive	9
Local	43	Accountable	8
Equal / inequalities	36	Largest	8
Christian	35	Passion	7
Trust	32	Champion	6
Effective	30	Grow/Growth	6
Potential	28	Inclusion	6
Future	27	Imagine / imaginative	5
Dignity	22	Steward	5
Diversity	19	Determination	3
Innovative/innovation	19	Enrich	3
Justice	16	Flexible	3
Empower	12	Cost-effective	2
Healthy	12	Harmony	2
Expertise	11	Neutrality	2
Responsibility	11	Friendly	1
Independent	10	Open-minded	1

A simple guide to creating a powerful vision and mission

Start with the heart and soul of your organisation. Vision statements should come from the heart of the organisation. They are not some paper exercise out of a marketing textbook but the opportunity to distil and agree some of the essence of an organisation. Often the creation of a vision statement helps trustees and senior managers to establish what they see as some of the fundamental tenets of the organisation.

Good vision statements act as a pole star in the darkness. The best vision statements give every member of staff, every donor and every volunteer a reference point against which to measure their own experience. A vision should allow people from across the organisation to say, 'I believe I'm part of that', and feel empowered and proud to be part of what the organisation is achieving. Alternatively a vision statement may give people a reference point through which they can articulate and understand their frustration between their experience and the promise of the vision or mission.

Vision statements are for everyone. The vision statement shouldn't be for funders or trustees or major donors but for everyone. It's not just for the marketing or fundraising teams. It's not an elite document for the walls of boardrooms or CEOs. It's often easy to find out how powerful and relevant the vision document is – ask staff what it is. It's amazing how often staff don't know their own organisation's vision, mission or values.

Every charity wants to be caring, dedicated and friendly. Charities often use vision statements to confuse two things: features that make them distinctive, and features that are part of a universal charity value-set. For example most charities are caring towards their staff and their beneficiaries. It's good for a charity to be caring but hardly unique. 'Caring' as an attribute for a charity is the equivalent of marketing a car as 'silver'. So in any vision statement make sure the space that the charity occupies is more about what's unique and distinctive, than what's important but ubiquitous.

Secure wide ownership but don't write by committee. Vision statements need to inspire. They also need to feel relevant to the stakeholders of the organisation. The solution to this paradox is not to make vision statements feel like legal documents, or fill them with sub-clauses and subjunctives. The solution is to consult widely across the organisation before drafting or re-drafting a vision statement and then consult once the statement is complete. However, the drafting of this statement should be left in the hands of one or two people – preferably individuals with good, if not great, copywriting skills.

Less is more. Omit redundant words in vision statements. Do they really need to say 'registered' charity (is there any other kind?) Or practical support (not many charities provide impractical support)? Or positive change (who promotes negative change?) While tautologies should be omitted, picture-painting adjectives should not. Vision statements should paint a picture in the minds of readers of the kind of organisation you are and the world you believe in.

Live it, breathe it, be it. In the end it doesn't matter what your vision or your mission or your values are if you don't live and breathe them. Too many vision statements are confined to the walls of a charity's reception or board room. The best vision statements in the world are worthless if they aren't guiding and giving focus to people everyday.

About nfpSynergy

nfpSynergy is a think-tank and research consultancy dedicated to not-for-profit organisations and issues. The purpose of nfpSynergy is to provide ideas, insights and information to help not-for-profit organisations thrive in a changing world. Our services and activities include syndicated research, project work and independent research and policy work. (See below for further details.)

Charity Awareness Monitor (CAM) - The Awareness Monitor tracks the attitudes and awareness of the general public to charities, pressure groups and voluntary organisations eight times a year - four by telephone, four by paper.

Charity Parliamentary Monitor (CPM) - CPM tracks bi-annually the attitudes and awareness of MPs and the Lords to charities and pressure groups and their campaigns.

Charity Media Monitor (CMM) - CMM tracks bi-annually the attitudes and awareness of journalists who work closely with charities using both a questionnaire and qualitative interviews.

Youth Awareness Monitor (YAM) - YAM tracks bi-annually the attitudes and awareness of 11-25 year olds to charities, their activities and the issues affecting them

Charity Brand Attributes - This programme is designed to help charities find out in more detail how they are viewed by the public by researching which words or phrases the public associate with them.

Independent policy and research work

nfpSynergy carries out a range of internally funded research and policy projects, the results of which are often distributed free of charge. Recent reports and commentaries focus on charities internet use; payroll giving; gift aid; trust in charities; key trends in the wider social and economic environment and branding for charities.

Project and consultancy work

Of course, organisations often need tailored research or support to help them meet their objectives. As such, we regularly work with charities on a more focused and individualised basis. We have recently worked with a variety of voluntary organisations on projects which include: a communications audit, a series of seminars and briefings on the implications of the socio-economic environment, an analysis of corporate relationships and influence, and a global staff survey (in 35 countries) for a development agency.

If you would like to know about any of the work we do please contact: Alexandra Denye (Alexandra.Denye@nfpSynergy.net)
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nfpSynergy's Reports and Articles

nfpSynergy regularly publishes reports and articles, on different subjects all relevant to the voluntary sector. A description of all our reports and articles is detailed below. For a copy of any of these resources please email reports@nfpsynergy.net or visit our website at www.nfpsynergy.net.

The 21st Century Volunteer - A report on the changing face of volunteering in the 21st Century - this report aims to help voluntary organisations understand the current volunteering environment and to anticipate how volunteering will change over the coming years. In particular, it aims to disseminate the ways in which volunteer management will need to develop in order to accommodate changes in the external environment.

Ten campaigning tips for lobbying MPs - October 2005 - nfpSynergy has a wealth of back-data regarding MPs' opinions of charities and their campaigns, comments from those who work in this area and experience of the sector. This has enabled us to compile a report containing ten tips, which extract the most salient issues to emerge from our research, to help you in your future charity campaigns and lobbying.

'Branding: the jeweller's story' - Case studies from the voluntary sector plus a branding toolkit - July 2005

Following the success of *Polishing the Diamond*, we decided to pull together a series of branding case studies from across the sector. We have also incorporated some of the simple branding tools that we had either developed or come across in the last two years that we felt would help organisations develop their own approach to branding.

Virtual Promise - From Rhetoric to Reality - A report on charities' use of the internet between 2000-2004

What's really going on in the virtual charity world? This report is a culmination of four years of research into UK charities' use of the internet since the initial report from 2000 called 'Virtual Promise - Are charities keeping up with the Internet revolution?' There have been yearly updates since.

Innovation Rules: nfpSynergy's latest report on Innovation

A practical guide to innovation and creativity in the voluntary sector, covering the roots of innovation, and why it matters to voluntary organisations. The report also gives practical ideas and guidance on how to make your organisation more innovative.

Touch and Go: The internet, digital TV and mobile telephony as tools for maximising the impact of charities. July 2004

This report aims to help voluntary organisations better understand the nature of the current technological revolution and plan for the future accordingly. A key theme runs through the report: that new communications technologies, including the internet, digital TV and mobile telephones, allow charities to do more with less, to punch above their weight, to reach new audiences, develop new services and to remorselessly achieve their goals more effectively.

Disgusted or delighted? What does concern the public about charities? March 2004

A representative 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’.

Paid or unpaid? or how the public is more likely to think that trustees are paid rather than fundraisers – March 2004

A representative sample of the UK population was asked to identify which of a variety of groups involved with charities was paid or unpaid. The results are illuminating and help to guide charities to communicate better with their stakeholders.

Share giving – sheer indifference – March 2004

A research report on the use of share giving by charities, a policy introduced in April 2000, which allows individuals to give shares and offset the value of the shares sold against their income tax liability and avoid capital gains tax liability.

You can take a Gift Aid Horse to Water... February 2004

A research report on charities attitudes to Gift Aid and its marketing which shows charities are not making enough of Gift Aid. The first report ‘Looking a Gift-Aid horse in the mouth – July 2003’ is also available.

The power of dreams, the burden of leadership: Report on the Britain’s Most admired Charity Survey – October 2003

‘The power of dreams, the burden of leadership’ is a report disseminating the ‘Britain’s Most Admired Charities’ survey data.

Five key trends and their impact on the voluntary sector – May 2003

The impact of social and economic change on the voluntary and community sector is far-reaching. The trends examined in this first briefing are the ageing population, the changing nature of households and families and increased levels of educational qualifications and aspirations.

Payroll Giving: Big Opportunities / Big Obstacles – December 2002

A research report on charities’ attitudes to payroll giving and its marketing. Questionnaires were sent to over 600 charities ranked by income. 136 completed questionnaires were received.

Polishing the diamond – October 2002

A charity’s image is crucial to the success of every part of the organisation. ‘Polishing the Diamond’ uses case studies and examples from the NSPCC, Friends of the Earth, VSO, Diabetes UK, Barnardo’s, WWF-UK and a number of other charities to illustrate how branding in charities is handled in practice. Our most popular report.

Any of these resources can be obtained by emailing reports@nfpsynergy.net or visiting our website at www.nfpsynergy.net.

For further information about the work that nfpSynergy does please contact Amandine Courtin either by telephone on (020) 7426 8888 or e-mail amandine.courtin@nfpsynergy.net.