

What is a pigeon hole, and why do charities need them?

The human race likes to categorise. Our brains continually want to divide things into those that are good or bad, right or wrong, light or dark. Nature abhors not so much a vacuum, as a spectrum. The result of the desire to categorise is that in all parts of our lives we make our choices about those we love, those we hate, our beliefs and our world views. We make these judgements on appearances or our initial experiences. The Scandinavian businessman Jan Carlzon talks about *'moments of truth'*: these precious few occasions when we actually make up our mind about something – whether it be an airline, a bank, a supermarket, a restaurant or a charity. The impact of this is that rather than evaluating every piece of evidence equally, we use it to back up our previous judgements. Once we love a restaurant we tend to filter our subsequent experiences on that basis.

This desire to categorise also applies to charities. People want to be able to put charities into categories or pigeon holes. 'This charity is a children's charity'. 'That one is a cancer charity.' Not all pigeon holes are equal. Most people have a pigeon hole for children or cancer but not necessarily for disability or human rights.

Just as there are *'moments of truth'* there are probably also *'moments of awareness'*. Those moments we register a charity in our memory. And once we have heard of a charity we are more likely to remember it in the future. These *'moments of awareness'* probably happen in school for the best-known charities. The key challenge for a charity is to turn a fleeting mention into a lasting memory. A key part of this process is to give people a pigeon hole into which they can slot those *'moments of awareness'*.

However pigeon holes and awareness are not the same thing. A charity can have high awareness but no real pigeon hole: or an inaccurate one. For example, people have heard of many charities – but are vague about what they do: try asking people the difference between the major children's charities.

Charities can also have low awareness but a clear pigeon hole. So Sightsavers, for example, is not Britain's best known charity but has clarity about its work and can be pigeon holed through its name and its communications. This in turn has driven people to support it because they appreciate that focus and clarity.

Perhaps the worst position to be in is to have neither awareness nor a clear pigeon hole. This is the situation that many charities are in. This lack of a clear focus is often compounded by internal battles which mean that rather than focus externally on one or two key activities many charities like to emphasise the breadth of what they do rather than the focus of it.

What does all this mean for awareness building?

For those who want to raise awareness there is a simple but vital question:

- What is our pigeon hole?

This can be broken down into a number of other questions?

- What do we want to be famous for?
- Why will anyone remember us?
- Why should anyone be inspired to give to us?
- Which parts of our work does this mean we will focus on to create our pigeon hole?
- Which parts of our work will we scale back or not focus on to create our pigeon hole.

All this is poignant because many charities who talk to us about raising awareness appear keen to increase awareness by throwing money at the problem, rather than by making themselves easier to remember. In other words they hope that awareness advertising, a name change, or a logo will increase their awareness. The reality is that this rarely works or is an expensive route to fame.

However, building awareness on the back of a clear focus or pigeon hole is a much more robust route to success. It helps people know why they should remember you and makes those moments of interaction much more likely to stick in the memory. Equally important it is a resilient approach – people are clear why they should engage with you and give to you. So even if total awareness is not raised overnight those who are reached are motivated.

In short, pigeon hole first, awareness second is the route to success that we would advocate every time.