

## **What can a CEO do to help increase awareness and build brands?**

Chief Executives play a vital role in creating awareness – yet all too often they are bystanders in the awareness process. It is interesting that in the commercial sector most CEOs would see themselves as the guardians of their brand (of which awareness-building is the first step) yet in the charity sector most CEOs are at best neutral and often hostile to branding and, by inference, to awareness-building.

Perhaps the first and most important thing that a CEO can do to support their awareness-raising and brand-building is to see it as part of their role and, therefore, to champion it. This can be achieved by incorporating awareness into SMT discussions, driving the strategy, facilitating investment in awareness-raising and making sure that it doesn't drop off the organisation's radar. What does this mean in practice? Below are some suggestions.

### **Supporting their fundraising and communications teams**

All too many fundraising and communication directors would say that getting their CEOs to be interested in awareness and brand is hard work. One communications director described their CEO as 'leaving me to it' when the going got difficult. CEOs need to be regularly asking for the latest updates on activities and challenges. They need to make sure that their directors know that they care about awareness – because they know that no brand can be strong without awareness amongst the key target groups.

### **Ensuring investment in awareness building**

Few charities can increase their awareness without the investment in resources to deliver that awareness. For some organisations this may be about advertising expenditure. For others it may be about making sure that the organisation has sufficient press officers or a brand manager to make the most of every opportunity. It may be about investing in the time of the SMT to agree who they would like to raise awareness amongst. But awareness raising requires people who will champion it and devise and deliver the strategy. Therefore, the CEO needs to make sure that the organisation invests in people and resources that will deliver its ambitions.

### **Building a powerful and clear brand**

Awareness and brand are intertwined – inextricably. So the organisation needs to see awareness-raising as a key part of their brand strategy and to make their brand strategy a reality. Every time I listen to a communications director who has taken their organisation on a brand journey it is clear that their CEO is at least supportive, by letting their director lead, and at best visible and involved. The CEO has to

understand that a strong brand or image or reputation is a route to making their organisation's investments in services work harder.

### **Banging directors' heads together**

CEOs need to make sure that directors are neither squabbling nor indifferent to the needs of the brand and the importance of awareness.

Dare we say it, but sometimes fundraising and communications directors and their teams can see each other as the enemy, rather than collaborators with different routes to the same goal.

The two disciplines have different styles, different skills, and different roles in raising awareness and building a brand. Sometimes the relationships between the two teams can more closely resemble a cold war than comrades in the same struggle. Therefore the CEO needs to "bang their heads together" so that they work for the greater good and see the bigger picture.

In other cases the CEO may sometimes have to tell the medical researcher or the service-deliverers that they too are part of awareness raising. Every service needs to be clearly labelled and not delivered incognito. Every person funded by the organisation should speak with the organisation's moniker – and not that of the university or the single service.

### **Keeping the trustee board on strategy**

Trustees are rarely interested in awareness and brand, and at times may even be openly hostile to the idea. The CEO needs to make sure that the communications and fundraising teams have explained to the trustee board the importance of the brand and of awareness, that the strategy has been discussed, and after that they are able to get on with their job. The CEO also needs to make sure that the board has realistic expectations of what is possible on the brand and awareness raising front. The timescales need to be long enough and the expectations matched to the art of the possible, not the impossible.

### **Being an articulate leader for the media and stakeholders**

The media and many stakeholders relate best to the key individuals within an organisation. This often is, and usually should be, the CEO. So if a CEO is reluctant to engage with the media, or does not understand the way the media works, or perhaps more of challenge, they think that they are a media star when they aren't, this can be a barrier to awareness raising. In fairness, most charities don't have the media banging down their door for the CEO to speak – but on the occasions when they do, the CEO needs to step up to the plate.

## **Keeping the key messages simple**

Left to their own devices, many charities would have (or do have) key messages that are either too complicated, too bland or are left unspecified. Key messages are one of the fundamental routes to increasing awareness, either of the organisation as a whole or of a specific part of the organisation and what it does.

There is no better example of the role of a key message than Tony Blair's 'tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime'. It summed up Labour's policy, it worked in writing and as a sound-bite, it was memorable (and parodied), it made sense and helped Blair become party leader.

Charities need key messages which perform the same job. The CEO needs to make sure that they personally are comfortable with using the key messages and that the process of compromise and consensus doesn't leave a charity with key messages that are too complicated, unlikely to be used or just bland.

## **Making sure brand strategies have staying power**

Communications and fundraising directors come and go, but usually CEOs last a little bit longer. So one of the tasks of a CEO is to make sure they have a brand and awareness strategy they are comfortable with, and which has value beyond any one individual. It takes time to build awareness based on a brand specific approach: if this approach changes every two or three years then it will waste much of what has done before. This is not to say that a brand strategy should never change, it can always be improved and developed, but through evolution not revolution. So part of a CEO's role is to make sure that the brand approach will last for ten years instead of two, and that it will have mileage beyond any specific individual.