

Why do fundraisers leave their brains by the door when they go online?

I can still remember the first fundraising appeal that moved me. I can remember where I was when I opened it and I can remember what it said. It was an appeal from the Head of Emergencies in Oxfam at Christmas 1987. He described the emotional and moral challenges of going to visit emergency situations, where children died in his arms, and then returning home to face the materialist world of Christmas. When will we say 'enough is enough' was his call to action.

I can also remember signing up to Shelter at 5pm on a long hot July day for a face to face fundraiser who said he had signed up one person so far that day and it was his birthday. I can remember my mother (a sheep farmer) telling me how she had gone into her building society the day after an early Red Nose day and declared that she wanted to buy a goat for £50 for some pastoralists in Africa.

I say all this because giving is a personal experience. It is about being moved and empathising with the situation of others. It is about a connection with others – whether with the beneficiary or the asker. It is about cutting through the miles, the lives, and the differences between people and seeing how a donation makes a difference.

Over the years the fundraising community has seen the importance of these personal connections again and again and it has woven them into its way of asking for money. There is a huge body of collective knowledge about how to ask individuals for money and what works and what doesn't.

So why when it comes to fundraising online via a website is all that knowledge forgotten?

There is no wooing, no story-telling, no personal appeal, no use of words, sounds and pictures working together to tell a story and make a compelling request for money. Just the flaccid, impersonal, 'donate now' button. The collective fundraising wisdom of a generation forgotten in the headlong lust for a donor's money.

Indeed a quick survey of five of the UK's best known charities shows that they all offer excellent donation form-based fundraising from their home page. But none of them have anything remotely resembling something as powerful as a DM appeal at its best. Nothing that parallels the power of a personal letter, or the leaflet that makes the case with passion and conviction (or if they do I couldn't

find in my visit to their websites). It is as if they had only heard about a donation form and reply envelope at the Stephen Pidgeon school of what makes great direct marketing.

Now any new technology or technique needs time to be adapted to be used appropriately. When they built the first bridge out of iron in Shropshire at the beginning of the industrial revolution, they used the mortise and tenon joints as if they were still using wood. When aluminium became a popular metal in the early 20th century the royal family had a cutlery set made from it because they didn't realise just how inappropriate it was for that purpose.

The problem is that the fundraising world hasn't yet created a way of asking for donations that works online. Indeed I would argue that it would do well to remember and use all that paper-based direct marketing has learnt.

But fundraising from a website is not inherently one-dimensional. It should be possible to combine sights, sounds and copy to work powerfully. It should be possible to create a compelling story online that rivals and exceeds anything paper giving has to offer. Yet viewing one charity's appeal online it just used footage of the Congo with no script, no soundtrack and no words to accompany the video. The week's good cause on Radio 4 could do better than that. Every fundraising section should have a 'hear our story' or 'take our tour' or 'see our latest appeal' section.

Part of the problem is that fundraisers assume that people come to a website once they have decided to give. That is probably true; not least because one of the UK's best fundraisers James Kliffen of MSF-UK told me. But, also because there is nothing on the average fundraising website that does much persuading. Fundraising from a website is about fishing for donors. It's very difficult for a charity to go to the donors online (and dear reader please do tell me how successful your fundraising emails are outside of emergencies) so when the donors, or potential donors come to you they have to be persuaded to take a nibble at your hook.

So every charity that wants to increase its online income should spend as much time as the average fisherman does on lures, baits, flies, rods, hooks, light and shade, weather and water. How can every passing individual be lured into being a donor? What compelling story or appeal would make a passing web surfer nibble at the bait and then be hooked.

So my first argument is that the world of fundraising has not yet worked out how to ask for money online. But more than this we need a new paradigm, a new way of understanding how we should think about earning money online.

In our recent report with Missionfish (Passion, persistence, partnership: the secrets of earning more online) we set out some of the key trends as we saw it in the changing nature of online income opportunities.

Five big trends in online income generation

Trend 1 – Charities are using the power of their stories online. The advent of blogs and blogging means one of the most powerful tools in the charity toolkit, the people that make up the organisation, are now the shining stars. These stories can be about beneficiaries, about front-line staff or indeed anyone who conveys their tale with passion, conviction and purpose. Putting these stories online creates great content and compelling messages for prospective and actual donors (they just tend not to be used as actual appeals yet).

Trend 2 – Charities are engaging first and fundraising second. The internet is now used as a tool for engaging people first – through blogs, through emails, through forums and message boards, through quizzes and interactive games and the whole panoply of web 2.0 functions. Once people are engaged then they can be persuaded over time to become donors in ways that match their interests in the charity and their preferred way to give.

Trend 3 – Social networking is forcing charities to make friends. Social networking is forcing charities to move out of their websites and into the places where people socialise. This is both scary and exhilarating stuff. Scary because charities are no longer in control on social network sites, their brand will be diluted and their competitors may also be their next door neighbour. But it's exhilarating because individuals are the engine of social networks – so when they start to advocate and network for a charity or a cause, they are more genuine and more personal in the eyes of others who see their sites.

Trend 4 – Integration and internal communications are keys to success. Nobody knows quite where to put new media. Is it a communications tool, an IT tool, a fundraising tool or a separate department? The reality is that new media is a multi-purpose tool and wherever it sits it is vital that all the different users work together to maximise the coherence and power of the charity's message. The result of this should be that earning online is part of an integrated whole – linked with, and complemented by other web activities. If an

organisation puts it uses of the internet in silos it will dissipate the strength of its web presence.

Trend 5 – Multiple income-generating partners are key. The old paradigm of getting people to give money via credit card donation and a 'donate now' button is gradually giving way to a multi-partnership model. In this approach a charity may offer multiple ways to give and generate revenue. The best of these represent the hijacking of a web user's existing habits for a charity's purposes. There are already ways of raising money online through search engines, auction sites (eBay for Charity being the largest and most successful of these of course), affinity partnerships and a host of other mechanisms. These partnership arrangements are a win/win for charities. They help reach new audiences, give supporters ways to raise money without giving, and are usually low or no cost to set up: and can be easily embedded into existing websites.

Put together these do not constitute a successful model for income-generation online. But they do indicate the direction of travel for online income-generation. However there is a missing element in this direction of travel.

How do charities take their offline ability to convert passers-by, literal and metaphorical, and use it to create online donors? In the real world we can do this on the street, over the phone, by post, through inserts and the letterbox. But in the virtual world we haven't begun to do this job successfully.