

Putting a face to the numbers: using qualitative research in fundraising, communications and impact demonstration

Last week (w/c 1st March 2010) the London Evening Standard ran a series of stories called 'the Dispossessed', highlighting the almost unfathomable gulf that exists between the wealthiest and poorest of London's residents. I wouldn't typically hold the paper up as a paragon of journalistic or literary excellence. However, reader responses to the Standard's campaign last week highlighted some important messages for charities to sit up and take notice of.

(<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/advertorials/dispossessed.do>).

Many people are still willing and able to give

The outpouring of generosity directed towards the few individuals profiled in the nightly pieces shows that even now, in the depths of recession (be it single dip, double dip, U shaped, V shaped or L shaped), there are people both willing and able to dig a little deeper into their pockets if the approach is framed in the right way.

At the same time, the local nature of the need seemed to resonate with readers. This echoes findings from our research, for example, among the general public in Scotland, indicating that there is a preference to give to charity that has a 'local' impact – however that is defined

(http://www.civilsociety.co.uk/fundraising/news/content/5964/scots_turn_local_for_charitable_spending).

Highlight opportunity costs and freedoms of opportunity

This emphasis on local impact might be worrying for charities with a broader geographic remit – for example, international development charities. However, another aspect of responses to the Standard's campaign provides another way of looking at the issue.

While some of the profiles in the series generated a predictable response of 'they've brought this upon themselves' (the woman with 11 children on benefits was subjected to an especially harsh judgment in the court of reader opinion), an aspect of the profiles that seemed to strike a chord with readers was the **opportunity costs** of poverty described by the individuals profiled: the young man who couldn't afford the UCAS application, jeopardising his ability to progress into higher education and all of its opportunities; the young woman who had never taken the Tube or bus into central London and couldn't imagine what Canary Wharf would look like up close.

This frank demonstration of the financial versus opportunity cost of these actions clearly piqued the imagination of readers and generated immediate action: Canary Wharf company partners offered office tours, retirees donated UCAS application vouchers and stationery supplies. A police officer – hardly the highest paid Londoner – observed that

he spends more on takeout coffees each week than a young person needs to file a potentially life-changing UCAS application.

In a society steeped in a protestant work ethic people (consciously or unconsciously) often associate poverty with a success or failure of individual effort. Over and over in focus groups, we hear donors and potential donors talk about wanting to see evidence that charity beneficiaries are doing what they can to help themselves. Highlighting charities' work in creating what Nobel economist Amartya Sen calls 'freedoms of opportunity' can be a fruitful strategy for motivating donors and volunteers for both small and large, local and international charities alike.

Do the imagining for them

Above all, reader responses show the importance of putting a face to the statistics generated by impact projection and assessments – be they outputs, outcomes, or opportunities. But the balance needs to be right: 'Too much data', 'Not enough data', 'Only one person,' 'how do I know this is real?' – these are all queries we've had in focus groups about charity communications. So imagine what you can put on an A5 postcard. What stories will you tell? Whose story will you tell? What key numbers will you tie to the story? How will you drive home the point that supporters' time and money is creating opportunities, and not going into a black hole or facilitating a cycle of dependency on benefits?

How qualitative research can help your organisation

While we know that nothing gets media headlines like a juicy statistic, we are often surprised at the extent to which clients see qualitative research as a luxury or unnecessary extra. In reality supporters, potential supporters, staff, beneficiaries, legislators and journalists tell us over and over again in our research how powerful the one-two punch of hard numbers and a human story can be in generating interest and support. This doesn't mean that 'soft' stories should replace 'hard' numbers; rather, the statistics need to be married to something that will have a lasting impact on the imagination and tap into our fraternal instincts to help each other. Well-designed, focused qualitative research doesn't cost the earth, and can be a key investment in understanding both the impact your work is having, and motivating your supporters to create that impact with you.